

This is the diary of a nature lover patterned after the traditional Baramasi of Indian poets. It tells you of trees, flowers, fruits, birds, snakes, insects and animals to be seen during the twelve months of the year in and around Delhi. It also tells of the many fairs and festivals celebrated in the country; how clouds are formed and what their shapes and movements mean; why hailstorms come in spring and early summer and not in winter; how birds communicate with each other and why their calls vary with the seasons. With the descriptions of nature are included poems on natural phenomenon by poets like Kalidasa, Guru Nanak, Meer Taqui Meer, Ghalib, Akbar Ilahabadi, Tagore, Rudyard Kipling and many others.

Nature Watch is the joint product of one of India's finest painters of natural phenomenon and one of the country's leading novelists and short-story writers whose series *The World Nature* was highly rated on Indian television.

The lure of the pen enticed **Khushwant Singh** (born in 1915) away from his profession of law and diplomacy to turn him into a successful writer and a journalist. He has authored over fifty books including *A Train to Pakistan*, a two-volume *History and Religion of the Sikhs*, innumerable collections of short stories and articles as well as translations of Urdu and Punjabi works. He was also the editor of *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, a Times of India publication. Presently his syndicated columns *Gossip Sweet and Sour* and *With Malice Towards One and All* are popular for their forthright comments and humour. In his own words 'Nature Watch is the most precious book that I have written'.

Siddhasattwa Basu is a painter, illustrator and animator. Graduate of the Government College of Art and Craft, Calcutta, he has worked in the Design Unit of Thomson Press and has been closely associated with *Target*, the children's magazine. His love and keen observation of nature and landscape also finds expression in *To Live in Magic*, a book of nature poems and prayers for children by Ruskin Bond. His cartoon character *Ghayab* shortly be seen in a television serial on Doordarshan.

Nature watch

Text by Khushwant Singh

Illustrations by Suddhsatva Basu



How It All Began

MANY YEARS ago when I was a young man, I happened to spend a summer with my friends, the Wints, in Oxford. Guy Wint was on the staff of *The Observer* and was away in London most of the day. His wife, Freda, had converted to Buddhism and was also out most of the time meeting fellow Buddhists. Their son, Ben, was at a boarding school. For company I had the Wint's three-year-old daughter, Allegra. In the mornings I worked in my room. When Allegra returned from her nursery school, I gave her a sandwich and a glass of milk before we went out for a walk. Since she knew the neighbourhood, she led the way along paths running through woods of oak, beech and rhododendron to the University cricket grounds. I would watch the game for a while—the Nawab of Pataudi often played there—buy her an ice-cream and then follow her back homewards.

Allegra, or Leggie as we called her, was a great chatterbox as well as an avid collector of wild flowers. Our return journey always took much longer as I had to pick whatever flower she wanted. She would point in some direction and order: 'I want those snow-drops behind that bush.' Or shout, 'Goody! I want them blue-bells! I want lots of them for Mummy!' Then there were periwinkles and lilies-of-the-valley, and many others. By the time we had our hands full of flowers, Leggie was too tired to leg it home. I had to go down on my knees for her to climb up on my shoulders. She had her legs round my neck and her chin resting on my head. A game she enjoyed was to stick flowers in my turban and beard. By the time we got home, I looked like a wild man of the woods. It was from little Allegra Wint that I learnt the names of many English wild flowers.

On weekends when the Wint family was at home we spent most of the day sunning ourselves in the garden. Since the Wints had a few cherry and apple trees, there were lots of birds in their garden. The dawn chorus was opened by thrushes and blackbirds. They sang through the day till late into the twilight. Both birds sounded exactly alike to me. Freda would quote Robert Browning to explain the difference:

*That's the wise thrush; he sings each song twice over,
Lest you should think he never could recapture
The first fine careless rapture.*

The wise thrushes of Oxford had not read Browning and rarely repeated their notes. Or perhaps the blackbirds deliberately went over theirs again to confuse people like me. Then there were chaffinches, buntings, white throats, and many other varieties of birds whose songs became familiar to me. That summer, I heard nightingales on the Italian lakes and in the forest of Fontainebleau. (Contrary to the popular notion, nightingales sing at all hours of the day and night).

Back home in Delhi I felt as if I was on alien territory as far as the fauna and the flora were concerned. Before I had gone abroad, I had taken no interest in nature. When I returned I felt acutely conscious of this lacuna in my information as I could not identify more than a couple of dozen birds or trees. Getting to know about them was tedious but immensely rewarding. I acquired books on trees, birds and insects and spent my spare time identifying those I did not know. I sought the company of bird-watchers and horticulturists. Gradually my fund of information increased and I dared to give talks on Delhi's natural phenomena on All India Radio and Doordarshan.



For the last many years I have maintained a record of the natural phenomena I encounter every day. However, my nature-watching is done in a very restricted landscape, most of it in my private back garden. It is a small rectangular plot of green enclosed on two adjacent sides by a barbed wire fence covered over by bougainvillea creepers of different hues. The other two sides are formed by my neighbour's and my own apartments. He has fenced himself off by a wall of hibiscus; I have four ten-year-old avocado trees (perhaps the only ones in Delhi) which between them yield no more than a dozen pears every monsoon season; and a tall eucalyptus smothered by a purple bougainvillea. There is a small patch of grass with some limes, oranges, grape-fruits and a pomegranate. I do not grow many flowers; a bush of gardenia, a couple of jasmines and a queen of the night (*raat-ki-rani*). Since my wife has strictly utilitarian views on gardening, most of what we have is reserved for growing vegetables. At the further end of this little garden I have placed a bird-bath which is shared by sparrows, crows, mynahs, kites, pigeons, babblers and a dozen stray cats which have made my home theirs. Facing my apartment on the front side is a squarish lawn shared by other residents of Sujan Singh Park. It has several large trees of the ficus family, a young choryzzia and an old mulberry. I have a view of this lawn from my sitting-room windows framed by a *madhumalati* creeper and a hedge of hibiscus. What perhaps accounts for the profusion of bird life in our locality are several nurseries in the vicinity, the foliage of many old *papari* (*Pongamia glabra*) trees and bushes of *cannabis sativa* (*bhang*) which grow wild. I have not kept a count of the variety of birds that frequent my garden but there is never a time when there are none. Also, there are lots of butterflies, beetles, wasps, ants, bees and bugs of different kinds.

There was a time when I spent Sunday mornings in winter in the countryside armed with a pair of binoculars and Salim Ali's or Whistler's books on Indian birds. My favourite haunts were the banks of the Jamuna behind Tilpat village; Surajkund, the dam which supplies water to its pool; and the ruins of Tughlaqabad Fort with its troops of rhesus monkeys. I still manage to visit these places at least once a year to renew acquaintance with water fowl, skylarks, weaver birds and variety of wild plants like *akk*, *debla*, *vasicka*, mesquite, Mexican poppy and lantana which grow in profusion all round Delhi.



January

FOR SOME people the year begins at the hour of midnight. They bid fare-well to the old and usher in the new with revelry and song, bursting balloons and swilling champagne. For others it begins when the rim of the sun appears on the eastern horizon. For me it starts some time between the two, when I get up to place a platter of milk for a dozen stray cats waiting impatiently outside my door beside the morning paper which is delivered to me at 4.30 a.m. I do not feel the day has really and truly begun till I have read the paper, heard the KBC news and drunk a mugful of warm Ginseng tea. Then I pull back the curtains of my window, switch off my table lamp and watch the black of the night turn to the grey of the dawn. I hear spotted owlets screech in the mulberry tree. I catch glimpses of small bats flitting by. And the dawn chorus begins with the raucous cawing of crows followed by the chittering of sparrows and the shrill cry of kites. Sometimes when it is still dark I step out onto the lawn behind my apartment to gaze at the moon or the brightly shining morning star. I return to my study and switch on the radio to listen to the relay of the morning service (*Asa di vaar*) from the Golden Temple. When it comes to Guru Nanak's lines on the *semul* to emphasize that the size of a tree has no bearing on what it yields, I know the morning service is half over and it is time for me to wake up my wife who likes to take her morning walk in the Lodi Gardens at dawn. I get into my shorts to leave for my morning game of tennis. I have to first wipe the dew off the window panes of my car because often the humidity is already 95 per cent. It is still dark. I switch on my headlights scattering clusters of crows pecking

at mangled remains of rats, cats and dogs run over by speeding traffic the night before.

My early morning drive to the Gymkhana Club and the hour and a half I spend there provide a feast for the eyes and ears. The Club grounds are full of tall trees. Since the side dividing the Gymkhana from the residence of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi has for security reasons been closed to traffic, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of birds in the area. My morning game of tennis is played to the accompaniment provided by magpie robins (*dayal* or *shama*), golden orioles, barbets, *koels*, peafowl and *papeehas*. The bird orchestra varies with the seasons. Often when I look up to take a lob I miss it because grey hornbills, lapwings or monsoon birds distract me.

On New Year's Day the sun comes up at 7.14 a.m. It can be very cold with temperatures falling below 5°; it rarely rises above 18° centigrade on sunny afternoons. The cold takes its toll of the undernourished and unhoused poor of the country. Papers carry reports of people dying of exposure: the average toll is between 50 to 100 every winter. Morning mists—more in the category of smogs—which begin around Christmas persist till the middle of January and disrupt many airline schedules.

There is something odd about the length of days and nights. The winter solstice is on 22-23 December with the shortest day and the longest night. Thereafter days should get longer at the expense of nights, with the sun rising a little earlier and setting a little later. But it would seem that it does not happen that way. On New Year's Day the sun rises at 7.14 a.m. On the following day, instead of rising earlier, it can be later by a minute. At the other end, it sets at



Nasturimus



Bougainvillea

5.35 p.m. on the first two evenings, thus adding a minute a day. By Republic Day (26th January) while it rises only three minutes earlier in the mornings, it sets as many as 20 minutes later (5.55 p.m.). Apparently this eccentricity is due to the elliptical shape of the earth. Or perhaps it wobbles as it pirouettes around the solar deity.

The festival of *Lohri* in mid-January marks the peak of winter. It is celebrated by lighting bonfires. Parties of children go from door to door, chanting doggerel verses with each line ending in 'Ho, ho!', and collecting money—it is India's

version of Guy Fawkes' day. By the end of the month our brief spell of cold and the winter monsoon are on the way out. It is not unusual to have a shower or two on Republic Day (January 26) but I have rarely known the spectacular 'Beating of the Retreat' which follows two or three days later to be washed out by rain. Traditionally the winter season ends with the advent of *Basant* (Spring) which also usually falls in the second fortnight of January or early February. As the saying goes:

Aayaa Basant, Paalaa Urant.

(The spring is here; the cold is nowhere).

Poinsettia



For the rich and the well-to-do who can afford to cover themselves against the cold and keep their homes warm, January is the best of months in Delhi: blue skies and sparkling sunshine. You can bask in the sun all day long. In the evenings, while the poor shiver under the culverts and flyovers, I sip my Scotch before a blazing log fire, then snuggle into a warm bed with a hot water bottle at my feet.

Bharatrihari describes the passage of days and years in ecstatic poetry:

*The cycle recurrence of sunset and dawn
Daily serves to measure life's decay,
But burdened in his mundane tasks,
Man does not grasp time's fugitive flight
Seeing old age, pain and death,
He is not aroused to anxiety
Drunk on delicious heady wine,
The world is made in oblivion.*

If you are looking for colour in January, go out into the countryside. The mustard is in bloom, spread out like a sea of canary-gold. Its bitter-sweet odour attracts honey bees. Besides mustard, there are lentils, mainly *arhar*, sugarcane with its pampas plumes of pale russet, and young wheat. Skylarks rise from the green fields, suspending themselves in the air and pouring down song till they run out of breath; then plummet like stones and disappear in the verdure. By contrast, Delhi's parks and gardens are largely flowerless till the latter part of the month except for marigolds, poinsettias, chrysanthemums and bougainvilleas. Delhi's Christmas tree is the poinsettia which persists through January; it is, as its Latin suffix indicates, truly *pulcherrima* (beautiful) with its bright red leafy flowers.

Golden shower (*Bignonia venusta*) creepers begin to appear hesitantly by the last week of the month. So do pinks, phlox and nasturtiums.

While winter's cold freezes the ardour of bird and beast alike, the larger variety of some species like vultures and kites are roused by it. By mid-January pairs of kites and vultures can be seen mating on branches of leafless *semul* (silk cotton) trees and can be heard emitting excruciating screams of pain and pleasure. Big trees like the *semul* and the *maharukh* (*Ailanthus*) are preferred by these birds both for copulation and nest-building. Smaller birds like crows, pigeons and sparrows begin their search for mates. Cock sparrows squabble among themselves while their hens barely take notice of them. Tom-cats are also in a quarrelsome mood. One afternoon two of my marmalade males went fiercely for each other and almost tore themselves to pieces. Their ladies were so frightened by the sight that some defecated before they could run away and hide themselves. Their minds were more on food than on sex. They eyed male sparrows battling beak and claw and, as the birds tumbled down with their legs entangled, the cats pounced on them. A strange phenomenon: I have never seen cats fight over a saucer of milk but tempt them with leftovers of meat or fish and they go for it and each other like hungry tigers.

For years a redstart (perhaps more than one) had been spending its winter months in my little patch of garden. It was a friendly little bird, twitching its tail after every hop as it moved closer to my chair on the veranda. Also somewhat foolish, in equating me with my cats. One evening I saw a few scarlet feathers on the lawn and realised that my cats had brought the redstart to bid me farewell for ever.



February

WHICHEVER WAY I turn I see signs of regeneration. The harbinger of spring is the *semul* or the silk-cotton tree, known in Latin by the bombastic sounding title *Bombax malabaricum*. The name is doubly deceptive: *Bombax* has nothing to do with Bombay, as you might be deluded into believing, but stands for silk-worm, though I have never found any on it. Furthermore, though Malabar claims to be its state of nativity, it grows extensively all over the country. There are hundreds of *semuls* to be seen in Delhi, both the scarlet and orange varieties. Visitors to the capital driving from the airport to Ashok Hotel can see them on either side of the avenue that runs between Nehru Park and the Diplomatic Enclave. They are in full flower in the first week of February.

The *semul* is tall and stately. However, since its flowers are without fragrance and its fruit inedible, it has been lampooned by poets. Guru Nanak used it as a simile for something large but useless. What he meant to emphasize in his hymn, *Semul rakh saraiyra ati deeragh ati muchh*, was that the stature of a person has no bearing on his qualities. It is unfortunate that he chose this tree to illustrate his theme because the *semul* has in fact quite a few things to offer. It yields an astringent gum which has medicinal properties; its wood is used to make matchsticks; its inner bark when converted into fibre makes cordage; and its pods when they burst in April release a gossamer floss which is used to stuff pillows and quilts.

The *semul* is one of the few trees which sheds its branches of its own sweet will to grow new ones. Since it can rise to over 130 feet, it has supports around its bole to hold it up. The bole is also armed with tiny spikes to deter men and monkeys from climbing up.

As red as the *semul* flowers but of a darker hue are the scarlet ixora bushes and solanum creepers which closely resemble each other. Both can be seen in profusion. Golden showers, which were in full glory in the last week of January, begin to fade out. So does mustard in the fields. No sooner does that happen than we know that Delhi's short winter is almost over.



Green Barbet



February has much to offer to the nature lover. The first pink blossom on a leafless peach tree is a sight to behold, 'fair as a star when only one is shining in the sky.' As the days begin to get warmer, birds become more active. Green barbets go on their wavy flight from one dark-foliaged tree to another, wind themselves up: *kurr, kurr, kurr*, and then let themselves go: *kuttook, kutrook, kutrook*.. Their Indian name is sensibly onomatopoeic: *kutrook*. The green bar-bet is a shy bird, barely visible among dense-leaved trees because of its olive green plumage. Its call betrays its presence. No sooner does it become aware of anyone gazing at it, than it falls silent and after a suspicious glance it is off on its undulating, heavy flight to another tree. I am impressed by bird-photographers who manage to get it entering its nest-hole in a tree or with its beak full of wild berries. Green barbets are my morning companions. Race Course road, now barricaded,

has *putranjiva* trees on both sides. In February they are loaded with berries and are therefore much frequented by barbets. 14th February is St Valentine's Day, sacred to lovers and traditionally regarded in the West as the beginning of the season of courtship. It seldom rains this time of the year. However, in my diary I have recorded heavy showers on some St. Valentine's days flooding the lawn in front of my apartment and washing out-my morning game of tennis. Morning mists persist, but they are not as thick as they were in December or January, and are quickly dispersed by the sun. At this time of the year, morning light is indeed 'russet mantle clad' as it walks 'o'er the dew.' Heavy dew-fall at night washes everything clean by the morning. Leaves, grass on the lawn, even my car, look as if they have been given a bath but not dried with a towel. The 'meek-eyed morn' is resonant with bird song. James Stephen might have written the following lines about a February morning in Delhi:

*I heard a bird at dawn
Singing sweetly on a tree,
When the dew was on the lawn
And the wind was on the lea;
But I didn't listen to him
For he didn't sing to me.*

How egotistical some humans can be!

By the middle of February Delhi puts on its very best clothes. Gardens, parks and roundabouts are a blaze of colour: calendulas, peonies, nasturtiums, phlox, salvias and dozens of others whose names I do not know. It is not surprising that February is the month favoured for flower shows. The local Y.M.C.A. has one of chrysanthemums, then roses, then cacti.



From the 15th of February I start watching out for the first signs of life on the mulberry facing my sitting-room window. During the autumn and winter months it is denuded of leaves and looks lifeless and woebegone. It is usually about the 18th of February that it appears to be enveloped in a light green haze. No sooner does that happen than I go to see how my little garden is doing. Lime, orange, apricot and grapefruit have begun to sprout tiny leaves and buds. The pomegranate has new leaves of a pale russet colour.

The dawn chorus begins earlier. It is still a mystery to me why green barbets call from one clump of trees on one day, and from another on the next. There must be more to bird calls than simply staking claims to air space.

By the third week of the month, the peach loses its flowers and comes into leaf. *Semul's* begin to shed their large, waxen blossoms which lie round the bole in a messy woven carpet of red and yellow. Crows delight in viciously pecking at those still on trees, particularly those that are partly open, as if cawing 'Open up, damn you!'

Insects are suddenly more in evidence. Every morning when I switch on the dining room light to make tea, I see a few cockroaches scampering away into dark corners. A friend tells me that the only way to deal with these vermin is to make small balls of flour mixed with boracic powder and strew them about. Boracic powder is lethal to cockroaches and word goes round in cockroach circles to avoid entering houses where it is lying around.

Moths appear from nowhere and flutter around my bedside lamp. Occasionally some stupid bumble bee gets inside the globe, making a devil of a buzz dashing itself against the hot bulb.

A not-to-be-forgotten February memory is the flowering of baubins which line many of New Delhi's roads. Two species, a *purpurea* (in Hindi *khairwal*, in Punjabi *koiral* and the *variegata* (*kachnar*) can be seen in flower along many roads. Both the white and the pink variety look their best when the first buds appear. White buds perch like snow-flakes caught in the branches of dry leafless trees. The pink and mauve baubins are never quite leafless but come into flower about the same time as their white cousins. Although baubins grow all over the country, it is largely in the north that people know that the bean of the *kachnar* makes a tasty addition to curry as well as a delectable mix with yoghurt (*dahi*). Whenever anyone shows an interest in trees and wants to know more about them, baubins are amongst the first I introduce them to: the shape of their leaves and the genesis of the name leave a permanent impression on the memory. The leaves resemble the imprint of a camel's





Bahunias

foot: being joined together in the middle each leaf looks like one of a Siamese twin. Many people prefer to remember baubinsias as camel's foot; others by the Latin name given by two 16th century German botanists, Jean and Gaspar Bauhin. They were identical twins. That sticks.

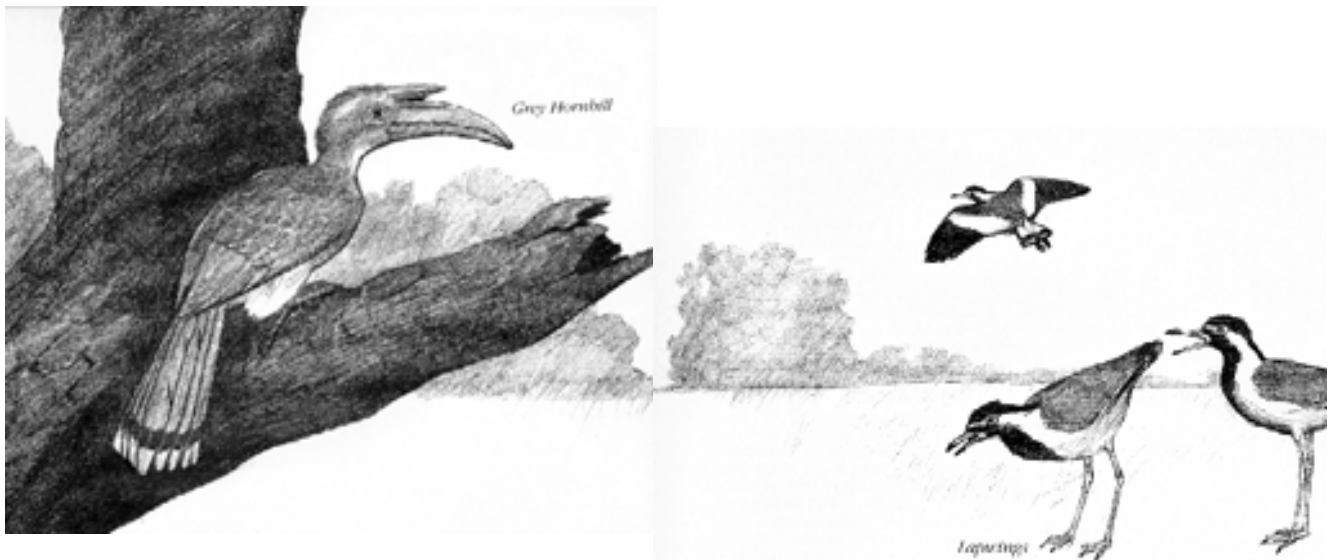
Big birds are much in evidence on big trees. One morning in the Gymkhana Club I saw a pair of hornbills fly to a *semul* tree where a couple of pariah kites were mating and screaming in ecstasy and agony. They watched the goings-on with great interest. Lapwings were also scandalized by the kites' shameless behaviour. They flew around the tree loudly enquiring 'Did ye do it? Did ye do it?' I wanted to shout back, 'I did not, but take a look at those kites!'

Grey hornbills are a common sight in Delhi. They are as ugly and as untrusting of humans as vultures, without the vultures' ability to soar majestically among the clouds. They go flapping their wings in undulating flight, screeching like kites. Their nests are malodorous because they are no more than holes in trees (very often the *semul*) lined by the hen with her own excreta. There she stays to lay her eggs and hatch them. Her husband feeds her berries which she passes on to her brood. She emerges after the chicks are a week old looking very fat and unkempt.

Lapwings are amongst my favourite Delhi birds. In February and March they can be seen striding along the parapet of the Gymkhana Club roof then suddenly taking wing to cavort about overhead and scream frantically. Many make their nests in gardens of large bungalows. I have often seen their fluffy chicks looking like bonzai ostriches flitting across the lawns and disappearing into the undergrowth.

I get to see a few woodpeckers every morning. Usually they are scaly-bellied green woodpeckers hopping around the bole of a *siris* tree behind the tennis court. They rarely call when they are on a tree. I have never seen one on the ground. Occasionally I catch a glimpse of golden-backed woodpeckers. They proclaim their arrival by shrill, ear-piercing cries. When the sunlight falls on their backs, they glisten like molten gold. The golden-backed woodpecker is a spectacularly beautiful bird.

One afternoon I saw a sight which continues to intrigue me. I had often seen sparrows gather in hundreds before roosting time and fly about together without any ostensible purpose. This afternoon I saw them on three adjoining *keekar* (acacia) trees. They looked like a swarm of bees buzzing about their hives: they



hopped restlessly from one branch to another chirping incessantly. I got within arm's reach of them but they were so absorbed in their own activity that they ignored my presence. It sounded like a very disputatious community meeting. After some minutes of watching them at close quarters I noticed that almost all of them were males. I detected about half a dozen hens in the total assemblage which must have numbered well over a thousand. I consulted my bird books but found no explanation.

Sparrow watchers have noticed a distinct pattern in their chirps which convey subtle information. They have established that the rate of each sparrow's chirp is proportional to the amount of food available for other sparrows. When food is scattered and cannot be monopolized by one bird, it chirps rapidly to invite others so that they can join it and also ensure flock security against predators. When offered food in one piece, like a slice of bread, the sparrow will peck at it in silence. Conclusion: the sparrow's chirruping indicates the balance between its desire to keep food all to itself and its fear of predators.



March

MARCH IS an unpredictable month: one day can be as cold as any in winter, the next as warm as any in spring. It may be as dry as a desert one morning and by sundown as wet as a monsoon night. Fresh falls of snow in the mountains of Kashmir or Himachal bring chilly winds to the capital. Strong winds push clouds up to freezing heights, convert raindrops into ice, toss icelets up over and over again till they are too heavy to bear and let them descend on the earth as hail. Take a close look at a hailstone and you will notice that it is of a milky white colour and consists of frozen layers of water like skins on an onion. I used to wonder why hailstorms did not occur in winter months when it is cold but in spring or early summer when it is warm. Now I know it takes strong winds to make hail.

I have often put away my woollens by the middle of the month and taken out my summer clothes, only to put back the cottons and once again get out cardigans and warm socks. What they say about May in England can be said about March in Delhi: 'Never cast a clout till March be out.'

The sun also continues to behave erratically. It comes up earlier by more minutes than it goes down in the evenings. On the 1st of March it came up at 6.47 a.m. and set at 6.20 p.m. By the end of the month it was rising 10 minutes earlier (6.37 a.m.) but setting only five minutes later (6.25 p.m.). However it behaved with customary rectitude on the equinox (the 22nd of March), dividing the 24 hours equally into day and night.

Humans are not the only ones to be fooled by the weather. Insects, said to be endowed with an extra sense of forecasting the weather, suffer heavy losses. Mosquitoes, flies and moths which come out of

hiding to pester humans suddenly find the weather turn inclement and are frozen to death. In my diary I record the first time I hear crickets chirp. This is usually in the second week of March probably somewhat earlier in my apartment than in other homes as I have a log fire burning every winter night. A cricket's chirp can be a reliable substitute for a thermometer because it varies the rate of chirping according to the temperature. If you do not believe me, try the following experiment: count the number of chirps per minute, divide the total by four and add forty. The total will give you the temperature of the room in Fahrenheit.

The vagaries of the weather make *Holi*, the festival of colours, a chancy affair. It usually falls some time between the latter part of February and the end of March. Some years only the young are out with their long tube syringes, buckets of coloured water and red powder to fight mock battles yelling, '*Holi hai! Holi hai!*' Other years it is warm enough for the middle-aged and the old to risk being dowsed.

By mid-March the mulberry tree (*shah-toot* in Hindi; *Morus alba* in Latin for the white variety) has both flowers and foliage. For a few days its caterpillar-like fruit is free to all for picking. Bauhinias are still in flower, though now with leaves around them. Mango trees are covered with a powdery beige cluster of blossoms.

I have said that New Delhi is at its loveliest in February. March can be almost as enchanting. Whichever way you look it is a splash of colour. The poet, Meer Taqi Meer, who spent the better part of his life in the city, more than a century and a half before the foundations of New Delhi were laid, went into ecstatic praise:

*If you like to visit the garden, go now;
For this is the month of Spring;
The leaves are green and flowering trees
Are in full bloom;
The clouds hang low
And rain is gently falling
The heart feels like a throbbing wound,
The tears have turned to one red flood;
This crimson-faced poppy of love
Dries up life and drains all blood.
This is the time when fresh, green leaves
Appear upon the trees;
And branch and twig of plant and shrub
Are bent with bloom and seed.
With blaze of roses' colour, Mir,
The garden is on fire;
The bulbul sounds a warning note:
Go past, O sir, beware!*

(Translation by Ahmed Ali, *The Golden Traditions*.)



In March both birth and death are much in evidence. On the one hand you can see the grape vine and *madhumalati* — *Quis Qualis* (meaning who? what?) *Indica*, a name given to it by a Dutch botanist because of its eccentric manner of growth—add new leaves every day; on the other there are *neems*, *mahuas*, *jamuns*, *peepals* and banyans shedding their foliage. For the next week or two gardeners will be busy sweeping dead leaves into mounds and making funeral pyres of them. While the pyres still smoulder, those very trees will come into new leaf. Of the dying and the reborn, *peepals* and banyans



have the most delicate of new leaves; pale pink, silky-soft and beautifully shaped. If you want an offering from nature as your book mark, you cannot do better than press their leaves in your album.

The *peepal* (*Ficus religiosa*) so called because the Buddha attained *Nirvana* under it) is a bit of a sponger. It will begin to sprout out of crevices in walls, even out of boles of trees where there is a little mud.. There is a splendid example of a *peepal* almost strangling its host tree in the Lodi Gardens west of the Bara Gumbad mosque. The *peepal* is a splendid example of an epiphyte.

Bird courtship, begun in February, is vigorously consummated in March. Vultures and kites which started off earlier are busy making nests, usually on the same kinds of trees they used for trysting. For some years I have watched a couple of white-backed vultures (I presume they are the same) choose the same cleft in the branches of the ailanthus overlooking the Golf Club swimming pool. This tree is common in Delhi. Its Latin name *Ailanthus* (tree of heaven) *excelsa* (very tall) is summed up by its Hindi name *Mahavriksh* 'the great tree'. There are quite a few giant specimens in the Golf Club and along many roads. Its flowers which come out late in February are hardly visible and its fruit, which drops by June is of *no* use except for propagation. However, its soft wood is used for making packing cases and match splits.

Some vultures seem *lo* have a sense of history and like to rear their young in ancient buildings. A pair of neophrons (Pharoah's chickens) have for years occupied the same niche in the western wall of the Bara Gumbad in Lodi Garden. Amongst twigs, straw and feathers I have often noticed sanitary napkins—which must be much softer than other nest material for fragile eggs and newly hatched chicks.

As Englishmen make a fetish about hearing the first cuckoo in spring, I record the first time I hear the *koel's* full-throated cry rather than the half-hearted gurgles that one hears during winter months. In Delhi their throats open up in the first week of March, and get clearer as the days get warmer and the time for courtship draws near. About the same time *papeehas* (hawk cuckoos) begin to announce their presence.

The most wanton of birds are house sparrows. Last month cocks were squabbling with one another while the hens were pecking away at impatient suitors strutting around them. The same hens now squat wherever they can, shamelessly exposing their cloa with cocks mounting them over and over again. Babblers become more vociferous: at the best of times they appear to be perpetually in angry argument. During the courtship and mating season, the argument often becomes acrimonious followed by pecking and tangling of claws. One morning, a quarrel started on the small lawn in my back-garden. My one-eyed cat, Dubboo, who makes up for her visual handicap by feline cunning and experience, watched them with her cyclopean eye. As the argument got hotter she crept stealthily along the platform till the disputatious flock was within leap distance.





Then she flung herself in their midst. Her efforts proved futile; she just missed a screaming bird by a hairbreadth. If she had gone for one bird instead of the flock she would certainly have breakfasted on fresh babbler meat.

Bird song can be heard round the clock: crow pheasants' deep-throated *hook, hook, hook*, tree pies' grating overture followed by a tinkling of bells, and golden orioles' fruity mellifluous calls can be heard every morning. On warm afternoons the *kooh, kooh* of coppersmiths' (*basanta* or the crimson throated barbet) sounds very much like short blasts made by diesel-operated flour mills in villages. No songbird in India can match the Magpie robin (*shama* or *dayal*). It sounds like the European blackbird or thrush except that its arias are much shorter and it usually sings only in the early hours of the morning or at dusk—matins and even song.



It is time I introduced you to another family of birds seen everywhere in Delhi, the mynah. We have four varieties: the common, the pied, the bank and the brahminy. Fifty years ago I rarely saw bank mynahs anywhere except on railway station platforms, crowded streets and the banks of the Yamuna, where they really belong. Now bank mynahs have found new abodes in water outlets on the sides of New Delhi's many overbridges. The bank mynah has a reddish beak while the common has a yellow one. Banks chitter incessantly and are a shade smaller than their common cousins. Brahminies remain the least noticed members of the family. They are stubby, beige coloured

with a streak of black on the head. The common are indeed very common and the only kind that have the audacity to enter homes and offices to carry on their guttural mutterings on window sills and fanlights. At dusk they gather in their hundreds of thousands on *jamun* and *gulmohar* trees and along with the equally numerous parakeets create a racket that drowns the roar of traffic. There were not many pied mynahs to be seen in my childhood days; or perhaps I did not recognise them as mynahs. Now I would hazard a guess that they outnumber their three cousins. They are black and white and their fluting call is much pleasanter than the calls of other members of their tribe.

In March, the Lodi Gardens and the Buddha Jayanti Park are much frequented by picnickers. Buddha Jayanti Park specialises in planting masses of the same flower for each bed; Lodi Gardens has quite a few flowering trees and beds of pansies, phlox, salvias, violets and other delicate varieties.

A good time for visiting parks is the afternoon of Holi after the coloured-water sports are over and most revellers are tired or engaged in *post-Holi* feasting.

Since drinking concoctions with *bhang* (hashish) is *de riguer* at *Holi*, many are likely to be sleeping it off, leaving parks free of crowds and noise. In Lodi Gardens purple bougainvilleas, the most luxuriant and pristine variety of the species, make a splendid show. To be seen among the birds are owlets, sitting in holes of old walls taking the sun with their eyes shut and shrikes. You can generally spot the bay-backed and rufous shrikes on the lower branches of trees. The shrike is also known as the butcher bird because of its nasty habit of impaling live insects on thorns to keep them fresh for consumption.

In the last week of the month, spring vegetables and fruit flood the market. Cucumbers and *kakree* (*tar*) are on lunch menus. Watermelons, both cantaloupes or musk melons (*tarbooz*), and *kharbooza* are available. In recent years their quality has improved. In younger days you had to be an expert to be able to tell the sweet melons from the tasteless and only bought *kharboozas* said to have come from Tonk or Saharanpur.



Today you have to be unlucky to bring home a flat tasting melon; most of them are sweet and succulent. Closely following on the heels of these 'earthy' fruits come loquats and mulberries, both the white and purple variety. Mangoes from the south and the much fancied Alfonso from the Konkan coast can be had for a price in fruit shops catering to the rich. But for locally grown varieties of this king of fruits you have to wait a few more weeks.



April

DELHI'S SHORT spring is over; summer is yet to come. Mornings and evenings are cool, the day at times unpleasantly warm. March flowers begin to wilt under the heat of the sun; summer blossoms are ready to take their place.

April inherits some of its unpredictability from the preceding month. All Fools Day is almost 12 hours long; to be precise, 12.26 hours. *Baisakhi*, thirteen days later, is 22 minutes longer. Both days can be equally unpredictable. I have known them to be as chilly as some in winter and I have known *Baisakhi* to be uncomfortably hot outdoors. I have also recorded *Baisakhi* celebrations at *Majnoon da Tilla* Gurdwara along the upper reaches of the Yamuna in north Delhi being washed out by unseasonal rain. The Bard was correct in comparing the vagaries of a new love affair with the eccentric weather of April:

Of how this spring of love resembleth

The uncertain glory of an April Day.

However, Delhi in April is indeed 'well-apparelled' and 'proud-pied'. Gardens continue to look like painters' easels. Flower shows in different parts of the city exhibit new strains of roses and bougainvilleas.

One year, early in April, I happened to drive out of the city towards Jaipur. It was rugged country typical of the Aravalli range which extends across the Rajasthan desert and ends in the northern suburbs of Delhi; *keekar* (camel thorn), cactus, wild thorny *her* (jujube) and other scrubby flora manage to survive in this waterless wasteland. However, flame trees lit up the countryside. And as I drove back in the evening the bitter-sweet perfume of *keekar* flowers wafted across the road. How well the poet Avimaraka caught the breath of a summer evening!

How enchanting is the great variety of the world!

Gone is the heat of the day as the earth dresses for night;

The evening breeze of this strange world gently the body touches

Slowly she removes the sun from her forehead

Quietly puts around her neck a garland of stars

Scatters the brave throughout the sleeping city

And joins together the bodies of young lovers.

(Avimaraka, *Love's Enchanted World*, translated by J. L. Masson & D. D. Kosambi.)



Jacaranda



Coral

I must have muddled my calendar of flowering trees in believing that the flame tree and the coral come into flower at the same time as the *semul*. They do not; the *semul* comes first. The coral and the flame blossom almost a month later. By *Baisakhi* (13th April) silk *semuls* have almost entirely shed their blossoms while the flame and the coral are in their best finery. By then baubinia beans are ready for plucking. Trees that flower at the same time as flames and corals are jacarandas (their Indian name *neelam*—sapphire—is an apt description of their colouring), widely planted in New Delhi. You have to see them in a cluster to catch the lapis-la-zuli blue of their tiny bell-shaped flowers. There are a few in the roundabout facing Parliament House on Sansad Marg, avenues of them along the Safdarjung flyover, on Siri Fort Road and in new residential areas. They can be seen at their best between the first and third weeks of the month.

People often confuse the coral and the flame, since they are both the same colour. Coral's Latin name *Erythrina* means 'red', but there the resemblance ends. The flowers of the coral (*Gul-e-Nastareen* or *Pangra* in Hindi) stand erect; flame petals are curved like scimitars and resemble a parrot's beak. Their boles and leaves are also quite dissimilar. The coral tree can be seen in abundance in most of Delhi's parks. It has many uses, its wood being made into stakes to support betel (*paan*) and pepper vines. The flame is still largely wild. There are many flame trees on the Ridge and a whole forest of them beyond Surajkund. People don't care to grow this tree in their gardens because its glory lasts barely seven days; the rest of the year it is just a mass of leaves that make a clattering noise in the wind. In north India they sew flame leaves together to make *donas* (cups) and *pattals* (plates)

to eat out of). A variety of astringent gum known as the Bengal Kino is extracted from its bark. For some reason the lac insect which breeds on flames is not cultivated on Delhi's trees. The tree, *Butea frondosa*, derives its Latin name from an eighteenth century botanist, the Karl of Bute. It has many Indian names; *dhak*, *palas* and *tesoo*. My friend the poet Jaseemuddin in Dhaka had many in his garden, so he named his house *Palas Baari*. It is said that the famous battle of Plassey (A.D. 1757) came to be so known because it took place in a jungle of flame (*palas*) trees.



One morning on the way to the Club I saw a whirl of kites dive-bombing an injured bat which had fallen on the road. It managed to elude them by dragging itself into a drain. Since the poor bat could not fly, it would almost certainly be eaten up by dogs.

How had the bat come to grief? What makes bats choose certain trees in preference to others? In New Delhi their favourite perches are *arjuna* trees growing between Motilal Nehru Place and the roundabout where Janpath meets Maulana Azad Road. They can be seen and heard squabbling amongst themselves every morning. I used to see lots of them in my father's garden on Janpath. Their favourite trees were the fragrant *maulsaris*. When these were in fruit, bats were as thick as bees in a hive. There are other varieties of bats (or are they flying foxes?) which inhabit old monuments. They have many nests in the ancient seminary at Hauz Khas.

By more than trebling its population in the last 40 years, Delhi has lost a great deal of its bird life that I lived with in my school days. A weekend in Kurukshetra made me aware of nature's sights and sounds now rarely heard or seen in the Delhi of today. At the University guest house I was shaken out of my slumber by the trumpet call of a peafowl by my window: *paon, paon, paon*—very much like the way its name is pronounced in French. As I opened the window, it scuttled away. The eastern horizon had turned grey and it was drizzling. All at once a *papeeha* (hawk cuckoo) perched on a neighbouring tree, wound itself up and began to call '*brain-fever, brain-fever*'. Besides peacocks and *papeehas* there were lapwings screaming as they flew about in the grey dawn, as also *koels* and drongos. No sooner had these birds fallen silent than the doves took over and the 'voice of the turtle' was heard over the campus. An hour later when the clouds lifted to reveal a deep blue sky, flocks of swallows chattered as they wheeled about in the high heavens.

Soon after *Baisakhi*, the first crop of mangoes grown around Delhi appear in the market. They are seldom very sweet or succulent. It takes the searing heat of summer to bring them to their full richness of taste and colour.

More trees are in the process of shedding old leaves and donning new ones, coming to flower and being deflowered (*sic*). What could have induced New Delhi's master-gardener, Lancaster, to import sausage trees (*Kigelia pinata*) from East Africa and plant them in Delhi? Sausage trees can be seen along Amrita Shergill Marg and many other avenues. It is a 'singularly ugly tree with scraggy red flowers which exude a malodorous oil and bear solid sausage fruit for which neither man nor bird nor beast have any use. Its flowers are said to open up at night and begin to close up by mid-morning. Apparently fruit-bats relish their taste. Some rural folk make a paste out of its fruit and use it against skin eruptions.



How different is the *siris*! It is quick-growing but short-lived. It is leafless till spring. Then suddenly fresh, light green leaves appear, and soon its pale powder-puff flowers spread their fragrance far and wide. The dual highway running from the airport to the city is divided by beds of bougainvilleas and has *siris* growing on either side. There are two varieties of *siris* to be seen in Delhi: *Albizia lebbek*, the fragrant variety, and the much taller white *Albizia procera* (*safed siris*). The second variety has a pale, smooth bole with branches well above the ground. There are a few lining Man Singh road on either side of its intersection with Rajpath.

By the last week of April the days are distinctly warmer and the afternoon sun unbearable. It is time to put on air-coolers. As long as the air outside is dry, which it usually is through April, May and

June, they effectively cool rooms blowing in dry air through wet *khas* screens. But beware! Damp air is the mother of body aches and pains and an invitation to mosquitoes and cockroaches. If you can afford it, use air-conditioners rather than coolers.

In the last days of the month the first *gulmohar* blooms begin to peep out of their green casings (my diary records some appearing as early as 15th April). The *Gul* ('gold') *mohar* derives its Latin name *Ponciana regia* from M. de Poinci, a governor of the French Antilles in the mid-seventeenth century. The tree is a native of Madagascar. It has become the great favourite amongst flowering trees because of its flamboyant display of fiery red and orange. Connaught Place has a cluster of these trees and they are now grown extensively in most new residential colonies.

Another flowering tree which resembles the *gulmohar* in colouring and is grown extensively in Delhi is the peacock tree, also known as the dwarf *ponciana* or Barbados pride. Why peacock? There is nothing of the peacock's blue about it. Its Latin name *Caesalpinia pulcherrima* (most beautiful) is well-matched by its Indian ones, *Krishna chum* or *Radha chum*, the crest of Krishna or Radha.

Pink cassias, cherry-red and white are now in full bloom. So also are yellow elders and oleanders, both pink and white. At the same time *neems* shed their flowers like sawdust about their boles. *Semul* pods burst and scatter their fluff which lies like snow-flakes on the ground.

The summer heat and damp rouse serpents from their hibernation. Delhi has all three species of the most venomous snakes; cobras, vipers and kraits. It also has others which are quite harmless to humans but prey on man's worst enemies—rats and mice. One warm afternoon I went to see Arpana Caur, a young painter working in the artists' colony at Garhi. The studios are built along the walls of this ancient robber

fortress. In between is an open space, now lush with grass and kannas. As I entered I saw a gang of urchins hurling stones, brandishing sticks and yelling as they ran towards a snake basking on the lawn. Before I could stop them they had beaten the poor reptile into a bloody mess. ‘*Saanp ka bachha* (a baby snake),’ they cried triumphantly. It was a small orange-coloured snake with diamond-shaped black spots—a full grown diadem (*rajat*). It was too late to tell the children that like many other snakes of Delhi it was not only harmless but also a well-meaning reptile.



May

MAY IS the month of the laburnum. Although *gulmohars* continue to blaze their fierce scarlets, oranges and yellows, you can see they are losing some of their fire and passing Nature’s baton, as it were, to the laburnums.

The laburnum (*Cassia fistula*) or *amaltas* has become a great favourite of Delhiwalas as the *gulmohar* for the simple reason that both are quick growing and colourful. Of the two, the laburnum makes the more spectacular entry. It first sheds its leaves; by the second fortnight of April only the long, brown-black tubular (hence ‘*fistula*’) fruit can be seen hanging from its bare branches. Then suddenly blossoms appear in clusters like bunches of golden grapes. The beauty of the Indian laburnum defies description. No poet or writer has ventured to put it to paper. Only painters have been able to do it justice. Alas! its glory has a very short lease—less than a fortnight—after which its leaves take over. The seed of the laburnum when crushed makes a powerful purgative and its bark, which is aromatic like cinnamon, is also used for tanning.



An equally beautiful flowering tree which is in bloom this time of the year and outlives the laburnum by several weeks is the pink cassia (*Cassia javanica*). It is a thorny tree with slender branches adorned with pink and white blossoms like bracelets on the arms of a beautiful woman.

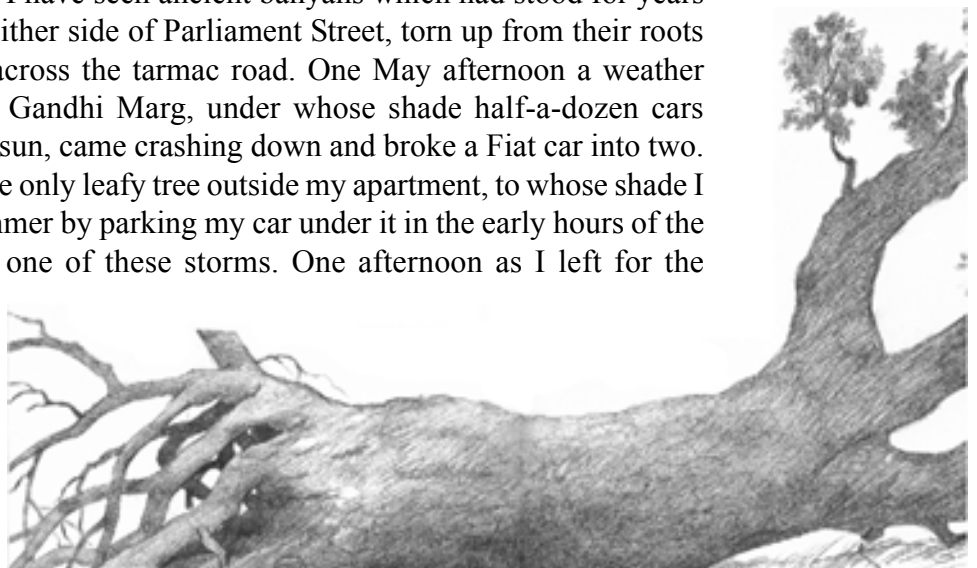
May is also the month of searing heat with the glass seldom falling below 40°, often touching 42° and even 45° in the shade. As one wag remarked, ‘India has only two seasons: hot and hotter.’ With the heat comes the *loo*, the hot wind from the deserts of Rajasthan. Our *loo*, like the equally warm *khamsein* (sirocco) and the chilly *mistral*, takes its toll of life. On the hottest days its torrid embrace beguiles the unwary and lulls them to eternal sleep.

Kipling has many memorable descriptions of the heat, dust and sandstorms that visit northern India during May and June. In his story *False Dawn*, he writes: ‘I had felt that the air was growing hotter and hotter, but nobody seemed to notice it until the moon went out and a burning hot wind began lashing the orange trees with a sound like the noise of the sea. Before we knew where we were the dust-storm was on us, and everything was a roaring, whirling darkness.’ Kipling depicts in another poem the lassitude and weariness that come with the endless days of heat and dust:

*No hope, no change! The clouds have shut us in,
And through the cloud the sullen Sun strikes down
Full on the bosom of the tortured town,
Till nightfall heavy as remembered sin
That will not suffer sleep or thought of ease,
And, hour on hour,, the dry-eyed Moon in spite,
Glares through the haze and mocks with watery light
The torment of the uncomplaining trees.
Far off, the Thunder bellows her despair
To echoing earth thrice parched.
The lightning's fly in vain.
No help the heaped-up clouds afford,
But wearier weight of burdened, burning air,
What truce with Dawn? Look, from the aching sky
Day stalks, a tyrant with a flaming sword!*

The days, hard enough to bear, get longer and longer. On the first of the month the sun rises at 5.40 a.m. and sets at 6.56 p.m., giving us more than thirteen and quarter hours of hell. By the end of the month the sun rises 16 minutes earlier (5.24 a.m.) and sets 17 minutes later (7.13 p.m.) adding more than half an hour of unwelcome daylight. However, dry heat is easier to bear than the moist, sticky, warm stillness that pervades our coastal towns and cities. Even though perspiration is profuse, it is healthier than the body ooze that surfaces on the skin in humid climates. There is of course the nuisance of prickly heat (*pitt*) which erupts round the neck, but I hold to the theory my grandmother used to expound—that prickly heat is a sign of good health. For those who find it too oppressive, there are air coolers which convert hot winds into fragrant breezes by blowing them through dampened screens of *khas* fibre. These smell of the earth after the first drops of rain. I have already warned you of the risks of keeping cool through humidified air.

May is also the month of dust storms, cloudbursts and hail storms. They come with little warning. There is of course a preliminary lull; but after days of windless calm you hardly notice it. Only pariah kites wheeling in the grey sky portend that something is on the way. Then suddenly it sweeps across with gale fury, blowing dust into your eyes and nostrils. It is usually followed by a cloudburst. The gale and rain take their toll of trees. I have seen ancient banyans which had stood for years like gigantic sentinels on either side of Parliament Street, torn up from their roots and ignominiously flung across the tarmac road. One May afternoon a weather beaten *neem* on Kasturba Gandhi Marg, under whose shade half-a-dozen cars sheltered from the blazing sun, came crashing down and broke a Fiat car into two. A 50-year-old mulberry (the only leafy tree outside my apartment, to whose shade I staked my claim every summer by parking my car under it in the early hours of the morning) was mauled by one of these storms. One afternoon as I left for the



swimming pool, a fierce wind came up. I had barely gone a hundred yards when three branches of the mulberry were torn from the trunk and fell down on the exact spot where my car had rested. If my frail new Maruti had been there it would have been mashed to a pulp. If I had been in it, I would not be writing this. That afternoon I drove through lashing rain along Moti Lal Nehru Marg, up Shankar Road to the Ridge past Buddha Jayanti Park. The entire route was littered with branches of *jamuns*, *neems* and *mahuas*. Since fragile eucalyptus trees have no branches worth speaking of, many had been brought down to earth in one piece. It was hazardous driving along these avenues and for safety I drove in the middle of the road.

Despite the intense heat during May and June, you can also have, besides dust storms and cloudbursts, an occasional hailstorm which brings the temperature down for a few hours. Usually the hailstones are very small, almost like gravel but sometimes they are of the size of pigeons' eggs. Hailstones of the size of cricket balls have been known to kill cattle and humans. A hailstorm in Moradabad in 1888 is said to have killed over 246 people in a few minutes.

Deciduous trees like *neems*, *banyans*, *peepuls* and *mahuas* continue to shed their leaves and don new vestments. *Semuls* have by now yielded all they have to give to humans. In May you will see families of poor gathering *semul* cotton in sacks to sell to the makers of pillows and quilts.

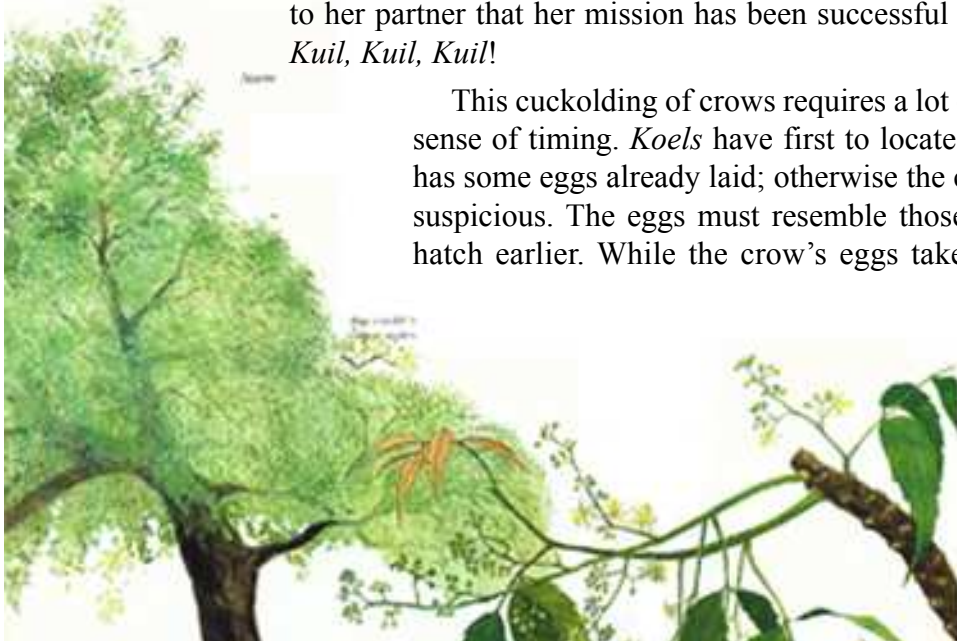
Petals shed by flowering trees lie about their boles. Laburnums spread golden carpets about their feet; *maulsaris* weave them in beige, *papris* (*Pongamia glabra*) in pink and white looking very much like a spread of tiny hailstones.

What is true of the flora is true of the fauna. In the feathered world, May is the month of birdsong, courtship and fulfilment. Kites and vultures which began courting in the winter sit hunchbacked watching over their nests high up in the branches of the *ailanthus* or *semul* trees. The screams of *koels* become louder and more strident. Crows grow more suspicious of *koels* intentions and can be seen chasing them away as soon as they come anywhere near their nests.

If you listen attentively to the *koel's* calls, you will notice a clear pattern. It is amongst the earlier callers. As soon as the eastern sky turns grey, male *koels* lay claim to their airspace by a series of staccato *Urook, Urook, Urook*, repeated over half a dozen times. In human language this could be interpreted as a warning to other males: 'Keep off and that means you!' The rest of the day the call is a monotonous *Koo-oo, Koo-oo*. While courting, it is the female pursued by her suitor who emits sharp cries of *Kik, Kik!* as she courses through the foliage. One rarely sees *koels* in the act of mating. Once the female is ready to lay her eggs, her paramour takes the lead in luring crows away from their nests. The female *koel*

then quickly deposits her egg amongst the clutch of crows' eggs and signals to her partner that her mission has been successful by triumphant cries, *Kuil, Kuil, Kuil!*

This cuckolding of crows requires a lot of cunning and fine a sense of timing. *Koels* have first to locate a crow's nest which has some eggs already laid; otherwise the crows would become suspicious. The eggs must resemble those of crows and must hatch earlier. While the crow's eggs take over a fortnight to



incubate, *koel* chicks are ready to emerge a couple of days earlier. They also have the capacity to edge crow chicks out of the nest and hog all the food their foster parents bring. By late August and early September you can often see *koel* chicks being fed by crows and hear them cawing like their foster parents.

Pied mynahs rebuild their homes. For many years I have seen a pair remake theirs in the same cleft of the *siris* which stands at one end of the tennis court. And while playing I catch the honeyed notes of golden orioles from *sheesham* trees, the trumpet calls of peacocks from a neighbouring park and *papeehas* calling in the distance.



I generally see more of nature at dawn on my way to the Club, in the hour I play tennis and on my way back home, than I do during the rest of the day which I spend closeted in my study. I did not realise for years, being too absorbed in the game, that the source of the fragrance that pervaded the courts was the *siris*. By the middle of May its pale yellow powder-puff blossoms fall and mingle with the dust to look like bedraggled fluffs of wool. It was the same with the *gulmohar* under which chairs are laid out for people awaiting their turn to play. I had taken its presence for granted and rarely did my gaze rest on it till one summer the elements compelled me to open my eyes and take notice of its flamboyant beauty.

For three days and nights dust had hung in the air like a pestilent cloud. Not a leaf stirred, not a bird sang. The once green lawn in front of my apartment had turned a sere yellow; flowers had withered in their beds. I said to myself: 'Only cacti thrive in this cactus land!' When the days were at their hottest, the fan stopped churning hot air, leaving me to sweat it out and nurse the prickly heat that had erupted round my neck. In the evening when I stood under the shower to wash the day's dust and sweat off my body, the turn of the tap only produced a few apologetic coughs but not a drop of water. One night, the air-conditioner died on me, converting my cool bedroom into the Black Hole of Calcutta. 'Why do I have to live in this God-forsaken land?' I asked myself.

The next afternoon a dust storm swept across the city with demonic fury. An ancient banyan on Parliament Street which I had regarded as the emblem of eternity was pulled out by its roots and hurled across the road, bringing traffic to a halt for several hours. Its limbs had to be hacked off before the stream of traffic-could resume its flow. The storm raged for almost an hour until twilight. Sounds of thunder and flashes of lightning pierced the dust-laden air. Then came the rain. It lasted only 15 minutes but in that short burst it filled the gutters to overflowing, flooded the roads, knocked out the electric supply and slew most of the Delhi's telephones stone dead. 'Why do I suffer these humiliations?' I swore. 'Why don't I live somewhere else where things are better managed?'

Early next morning I set out for my game of tennis. Every leaf of every tree had been washed clean. The soft fragrance of *siris* floated in the air. Golden orioles called. The *gulmohar* trees along the tennis court were ablaze with scarlet and yellow. A magpie robin (*shama*) alighted on the topmost branch of one and burst into song:

Amon deshti kothao khojay
Paabey no ko toomee,
Shokol desher rani shejey,
Amaarjonmo bhoomee.

(Search where you may, you will not find a land as beautiful as this, she is the queen, this land of my birth).

How could I have ever thought of living elsewhere?

June



MAY DRAGS into June bringing in its trail more heat, more dust, occasional squalls of rain and a harvest of knocked-down trees. The temperature still averages 40° and above. Pink cassias blush away unconcerned with the fierce sun. Laburnums, which have a delayed reaction to changing times, look as if they have just risen from their slumbers and are a mass of golden chandeliers. But by now most of them have more leaves than flowers on their branches. *Papris* (*Pongamia glabra*) still shed their hailstone-like flowers; *maul-saris* and frangipanis make

their floral obeisance to Mother Earth.

At this time of the year, Indian myrtles, a sub-species of *Jarul* (*Laagerstroemia*) come into flower in mauves and pinks and keep their colourful show going for a couple of months.

Days continue to lengthen. On the 1st of the month the sun comes up at 5.26 a.m. and sets at 7.23 p.m. — three minutes short of giving us 14 hours of murderous sunlight. Then comes the longest day of the year, the summer solstice on the 22nd June, which is only a minute longer. Although the eccentricities of the sun continue to baffle me, I have exploded at least one myth I had been brought up on since I came to Delhi as a child. We were told that the Qutub Minar had been so located that at the exact hour of noon of the summer solstice the sun is exactly above it and therefore casts no shadow. I visited the monument on the 22nd of June and awaited its shadowless moment of truth. It never came. Only the small shadow of noon lengthened as the sun proceeded westwards.

There is nothing romantic about the Indian summer; it can be a torture. Guru Nanak in his *Bara Maha* captures its rigours in a few memorable lines on *Asadh* (June-July)

In Asadh the sun scorches
Skies are hot
The earth bums like an oven
Waters give up their vapours
But it burns and scorches relentlessly
Thus the land fails not
To fulfil its destiny.

When the summer's heat is here, can the rains be far behind? Thorny bushes of *karwand* and *heever* break out into tiny leaf, and farmers see these as portents of the monsoon. I have rarely seen the *papeeha* (hawk cuckoo) before the rains have properly set in, but on many June mornings I have heard its calls getting more and more strident. The English, maddened by the mid-day sun, render its call as 'brain-fever, brain-fever,' and have named it the 'brain-fever' bird. The more optimistic Maharashtrians construe the same call as *paos ala, paos ala*—"the rains are coming."

In June Delhi receives its best crop of mangoes. Since this king of fruits is such an obsession with our countrymen, we should know more about it. India has almost 100 mangoes of varieties grown in every part of the country save its mountainous regions. Fully half of India's fruit trees are mangoes. Some variety or



the other of this fruit is available in Delhi from February till late October. The first, aptly named *Avvalla*, comes from Tamil Nadu. This is fragrant, pulpy, but gummy and without much character. Connoisseurs don't give it many marks. High on their list is the *Alfonso*, grown around Ratnagiri on the Konkan coast of Maharashtra. It is available in Delhi through April and May. It is also known as the 'magic lamp' as it is the gift chosen to send to people from whom favours are solicited. The *Alfonso* accounts for most of India's export of mangoes. Since it is beyond the pockets of families with modest incomes they make do with the cheaper sucking variety known as *Payari* which comes from the same region at about the same time. *Payari* is also crushed to make mango juice. Andhra Pradesh has its own prized mango in the *Bangan palli* which ripens by April. In addition Andhra produces a sweet and sour variety known as *Tota-pari* (parrot fairy), the rose-scented *Swarna rekha* (golden line), the juicy *Chaperoo*, *Korasam*, and two highly rated mangoes the *Imam pasand* (Imam's choice), also known as 'Collector Sahib', and the *Jehangir*, named after the fourth Emperor of the Mughal dynasty. By June all these varieties, as well as the new crop from Karnataka (*Mol goa*), Kerala (*Mondapa*), Tamil Nadu (*Neelam*) and Bengal (*Malda* and *Gulab khaas*) are available in the capital. More than all the exotic varieties, Delhiwalas prize the *Langra* (lame) grown in its own orchards as well as in Uttar Pradesh. Nobody knows why it is called *Langra*; some ascribe its name to a lame fakir of Delhi; others to a village of that name near Varanasi which produces its best specimens. Following the *Langra* with its slightly turpentiney flavour which irritates

sensitive throats comes the more delicately flavoured *Dussehri* grown in orchards around Malihabad in Uttar Pradesh. This was Pandit Nehru's favourite mango and he used to send a parcel of *Dussehri*s every year to Queen Elizabeth. Next comes *Sarauli* from around Meerut. This is often eaten mixed with milk. The mango season ends in northern India with three memorable varieties—*Chausa* (named after a village near Malihabad), also known as *Tsamar babisbt* ('fruit of paradise'), *Safeda*, a sucking variety from Lucknow and *Rataul*, named after a village in Saharanpur district. Everyone has his favourite. Mine are *Langra*, *Chausa*, *Rataul* and the new hybrid *Amrapalli*.

Mangoes have been cultivated in India from time immemorial. The poet Kalidasa sang its praises. Alexander savoured its taste, as did the Chinese pilgrim Hieun Tsang. The Moorish traveller Ibn Batuta records that it had become the favourite fruit of the Tughlak monarchs. The Emperor Babar, who liked nothing about India, thought it was highly overrated but his grandson Akbar planted an orchard of a 100,000 mango trees in Darbhanga, known thereafter as Lakhi Bagh.

Indians love mangoes with a passion that surpasses belief. Neither the dates of Arabia nor the watermelons or grapes of Kandahar elicit as much praise from them as does the mango. The Mughal emperors and their royal consorts had their own orchards. The last of this august line, Bahadur Shah Zafar, whose domain did not extend much beyond the confines of the Red Fort, grew some of the best varieties in the Hayat Baksh (life giving) garden beside his marble palace. Notoriously addicted to the mango was his friend, the most famous poet of the Urdu language, Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib. Many tales are told of his love of this fruit. It is said that strolling with the emperor in the Hayat Baksh garden one day in June when the trees were laden with ripe fruit he remarked: 'Your Majesty, I am told that every mango bears the name of the person it is meant for on its seed-stone. I wonder if any of these in your garden have Ghalib's name imprinted on them!' The emperor took the hint and had a basketful sent to the poet.

At another time a friend who knew of Ghalib's weakness for the fruit, tossed a mango to a donkey tethered nearby. The animal sniffed at it and turned away. 'You see Mirza Sahib, even a donkey does not like mangoes!' Ghalib was quick to retort: 'You are quite right, my friend. Only donkeys do not relish

mangoes.’ Another poet of more recent times, Akbar Illahabadi, shared this passion for mangoes. In a witty little poem on the subject he wrote to a friend:

*Neither letter nor message from my beloved send to me,
If you must send something this season, mangoes let them be.
Make sure there are some that I can keep to eat another day.
If twenty are ripe add another ten that can stay.
Your slave’s address you know, it remains the same
Dispatch them to Allahabad in a parcel in my name.*

Whatever you do, in your reply please be not so brash “Order for mangoes received. First send the cash.”

People who love the great outdoors and physical exercise find the summer months very trying. The only real time to get out is in the early hours before dawn. That is what many Delhiwalas do: thousands wend their way towards the Yamuna; thousands more go to one of the numerous parks for a brisk walk or perform Yoga *asanas* on dew-washed lawns. Since I find walking a bore and *asanas* a torture, after an hour of tennis in the morning I am happy to spend half an hour in the afternoon in a bathing pool. This facility is unfortunately restricted to a miniscule minority among whom I count myself. I have access to three pools, of which I prefer the one attached to the Golf Club because it is uncovered and has a row of ailanthus on one side and a shady *neem* spreading its branches above the changing rooms. One ailanthus is of special interest to me because a pair of white-backed vultures build’ their nests in one particular fork of its branches sometime in February. I am not sure when the eggs are laid or the chicks hatched, but from May onwards I see one parent bird guarding the nest while the other is out scavenging for food. When the chicks grow wings and are able to totter up to a branch both parents watch their progress. A fall from that height for chicks of that weight could prove fatal. They have to learn to flap their wings *in situ* till they are sure that the very first attempt to take to the air is successful. After my swim I sit and watch these flying lessons: parents sit above and whisper instructions in Vulturine language; chicks flap their wings and scream for help or a tiffin break. This goes on for over a fortnight till a strong gust of wind knocks them off their perch and forces them to undertake their first aerial journey. I have seen none come to grief and many pass the test with flying colours.

The pool attracts a variety of birds. Crows are ubiquitous. They come for leftovers of potato chips or sandwiches before bearers take away the plates. Trays of water for bathers to wash their feet in, before they enter the pool, are treated as bird-baths to cleanse feathers and slake thirst. More interesting are green bee-eaters which prefer to flit about the *neem* tree and, being the same colour, are hardly noticeable. When thirsty they fly down, hover over the pool till they spot an area free of bathers, then dive down, fill their beaks and happily fly back to the *neem* tree. Their green and russet hues as they skim across the pool surface make a very pleasant combination of colours.

We Indians believe that some trees afford a cooler shade than others. This has nothing to do with the size of their leaves but something to do with the way sunlight and air filter through them. Thus, thin leaved trees like the tamarind (*Tamarindus indica*), the rain tree (*Samanea saman*) and *neem* (*Azadirachta indica*), have cool shade; the more leafy *ficus* family do not. You can test this theory in Delhi. The entire length of Akbar Road is lined with tamarinds on both sides. There are not many rain trees (so named because their leaves fold on the approach of a storm) but *neems* can be seen everywhere. Besides its cool shade, *neem* is valued for its medicinal properties:



its twigs, like those of the *keekar*, are used to brush teeth, its leaves used like mothballs to keep away insects, its decoction serves as medicine against stomach disorders and boils, and its bark is crushed and taken as a tonic.

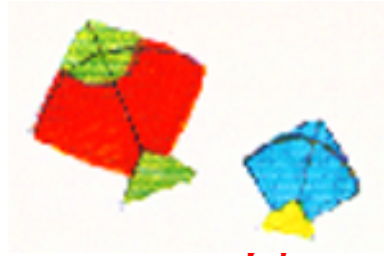
At one time the Golf Club had a large variety of fauna: sand lizards, cobras, kraits, hares, rhesus monkeys, peafowl, and all the four varieties of mynahs (brahminy, pied, bank and common). Hoopoes could be seen in pairs on putting greens and were often hit by golf balls. Near the club house were palm squirrels (chipmunks), tame enough to hop up on tables and take sugar cubes from people's hands. Then cats invaded the club house and multiplied rapidly. They ate up all the squirrels. Many peacocks flying out of the links in search of greener pastures fell victim to motor traffic which now runs on all sides of the 18-hole course. However, some stragglers of all these species survive.

For me the chief importance of June is the arrival of the monsoon bird. It is nature's messenger, appropriately named the *Megha papeeha* or 'the song-bird of the clouds'. I record its advent in my diary as soon as I hear its distinct wailing cry. This has varied from the 1st to the 15th of June, almost a month after they are sighted on the Malabar Coast. The *Clamator jacobinus* comes from the shores of East Africa in one continuous flight over the Indian Ocean helped by strong monsoon winds. After it reaches India some time in May, its flight inland is leisurely but well ahead of the monsoon. I have seen pairs flying around in pre-monsoon showers in June and occasionally spotted one perched on a tree (they like sitting on the topmost branches of tall trees). By July when the monsoon breaks in Delhi, flocks can be seen in all the parks and gardens. Being a parasite of the cuckoo family, the monsoon bird does not bother to make its own nest, incubate its eggs or take care of its young. The *koel* hoodwinks the crow and the monsoon bird does the same to the babbler (*Satbhai*). While babblers are busy looking after the step-eggs and chicks, monsoon birds enjoy the rainy season flying around and calling to each other. No sooner have their offspring been reared by their foolish foster-parents than they join their own fraternity and fly overland back to their homes in Africa.



I owe a great deal to the monsoon bird for establishing my reputation as a bird watcher. One very hot and sultry June afternoon I was at a meeting convened by the Director General of All India Radio where I happened to be employed at the time. The D.G.'s briefing went on and on till I was forced to switch off my hearing faculties. All at once I heard a wailing call. My ears pricked up and I went to the window to make sure I had heard right. The D.G. was upset at my inattentiveness and remarked in an acid tone: 'Mr Singh has obviously found something more interesting than listening to me.' Without thinking I replied: 'Yes, I have. I've just heard the monsoon bird. It will rain tomorrow.' Everyone burst out laughing. My prestige was at stake. Fortunately for me, the next morning the monsoon broke over Delhi.





July

JULY IS *savan*—the month of rains, a time for flying kites and swinging from mango trees, romance, song and laughter. Hardly a day goes by without a shower and often it is an uninterrupted downpour for two or three days and nights. This season can only be described as predictably unpredictable. ‘Who can say what thickness of cloud that day, what festiveness of lightning, what wildness of wind shook with their roar the turrets of Ujjaini?’ asked Tagore. He also has a memorable description of a *savan* downpour in his tribute to Kalidasa:

*Today is a dark day, the rain is incessant
The wind ferocious—tree tops rise
Like arms at its attack; their swishing is a cry
Lightning darts through the clouds ripping them,
Dotting the sky with sharp crooked smiles.*
(Translation by William Radice)



All one can do during these days is, like Tagore, to ‘watch the rain pouring steadily all round, till the darkness thickens, the solitariness of night approaches.’ While humans rejoice, birds, beasts and insects multiply. Earthworms emerge from their subterranean retreats to litter the earth with their castings; moths are born as if out of thin air and die by their thousands around every lamp. Flies multiply as *neems* shed the yellow, bitter-sweet berries on which they feed. Mosquitoes flourish as they now have more places to breed.

It is also the time for *jamuns*. This tree, known by the tongue-twisting Latin name of *Syzigium jambolana* as well as *Eugenia jambolana* (after the seventeenth century patron of botany, Prince Eugene), is venerated by Buddhists and Hindus alike. It is considered sacred to Krishna and its leaves are strung together to decorate temple entrances. There are hundreds of *jamuns* in New Delhi—on the lawns between India Gate and the Secretariat,

along Janpath and Connaught Circus, and around Parliament House. The tree comes into flower after March, and from July the *jamun* sellers begin to guard their trees. They shake the fruit down into sheets spread out on the ground. *Jamun* is an acquired taste. It has very little flesh and that, too, astringent, but is said to be excellent for diabetics and those suffering from disorders of the kidney. The Delhi variety is more stone than flesh and needs a liberal sprinkling of salt to become edible. It leaves the mouth feeling raw and painted mauve.

Rain water fills the gutters and forces snakes and rats out of their holes into the open. What a monstrous size some rats can grow to! Those that dare to come out in the open are soon set upon by kites and crows. I saw one in Lodi Garden badly lacerated by their talons, crawl into a cluster of bushes. Every other morning on my way to the Club I see a dead rat or two lying on the road pecked to pieces. On one occasion in Bombay near the Flora Fountain, I saw one desperately trying to escape from a flock of crows into a gutter. I crossed the road to avoid getting involved in this unequal combat between the dive-bombers and the bewildered rodent. The rat came charging towards me and tried to seek shelter between my legs, clutching at my trouser ends with its paws. I yelled and jumped to free myself and ran breathless to the pavement. Passers-by were most amused by the scene, and not very sympathetic. '*Sardarji chooha sey dar gaya!*' (A Sikh being frightened by a mouse!) jeered one. 'It is not a *Choocha*,' I retorted, 'it is a...,' but I could not think of a Hindi word for rat to distinguish it from a mouse. There isn't one. *Choocha* is the only word for both mouse and rat, for tiny field-mice as well as monster-sized sewer rats.

Back to the monsoon, with its moths, mosquitoes, fireflies, black ants and nights loud with the croaking of frogs. Indian poets have written more on the monsoon than on any other subject. I have quoted Kalidasa and Tagore. We have equally memorable descriptions of the season of rains from the reed pens of Amaru and Yogeshwara (ninth century A.D.), Subandhu and Bharatrihari (sixth century A.D.), Sudraka (fourth century A.D.), Vidyapati (fourteenth century A.D.) and Guru Nanak (sixteenth century A.D.). Amaru first describes the hot prelude:



*The summer sun who robbed the pleasant nights,
And plundered all the water of the rivers,
And burned the earth, and scorched the forest trees, is now in
hiding,*

Then comes the dramatic change.

*...And the autumn clouds,
spread thick across the sky to track him down,
Hunt for the criminal with lightning flashes.*
(John Brough: *Poems from the Sanskrit*)

In a few lines Bharatrihari sums up the pastoral scene in the rain-drenched countryside:

*Black clouds at midnight:
Deep thunder rolling.
The light has lost the moon:
A cow lowing for her lost calf.*

(John Brough: *Poems from the Sanskrit*)

Yogeshwara has a striking description of the courtship between peacocks during the monsoons :

*With tail-fans spread, and undulating wings
With whose vibrating pulse the air now sings,
Their voices lifted and their beaks stretched wide,
Eyeing the rain cloud's dark, majestic hue.
Richer in colour than their own throats' blue.
With necks upraised, to which their tails advance,
Now in the rains the screaming peacocks dance.*

(John Brough: *Poems from the Sanskrit*)

And finally, Guru Nanak has said the following in his hymn on *savan* (July-August) :

*O my heart, rejoice! Its savan
The season of nimbus clouds and rain
My body and soul yearn for my Lord
But my Lord is gone to foreign lands
If He return not, I shall die pining for Him.
The lightning strikes terror in my heart
I stand all alone in my courtyard,
In solitude and in sorrow.*

The Guru was apt in his summary of the rainy season: The seas have burst their bonds in the ecstasy of fulfilment.' Needless to say, during these days humidity rises to above 90° and although the temperature comes down, it is sticky and oppressive.

The monsoon is as good a time as any to savour *mahua* wine. There are not many *mahua* trees growing in Delhi and few locals know how to brew its fiery potion. There is an avenue of *mahuas* between the roundabout facing the main northern entrance of Lodi Gardens and Prithviraj Road, and along Rajendra Prasad Road. I know them well as I pass by them at least four times a day. *Madhuca latifolia* or *Bassia latifolia* (after Fernando Bassi, curator of the Botanical Gardens of Bologna) is a tall, handsome tree with ample foliage. It is highly prized in tribal areas both by aboriginals and by wild animals, particularly bears. When it flowers in February, they eat its honey-sweet flowers raw or cooked. They also dry them and brew *mahua* wine or distil them into strong spirits. In addition, they grind them into a paste and eat it as *mahua* butter. The product is used in the manufacture of margarine, glycerine and soap. A healthy *mahua* tree can yield as much as eight maunds (320 kilograms) of flowers in a year.



What surprises me is that our horticulturists have not planted more flowering, fruit-bearing and timber-yielding trees like the *mahua* and have instead opted for merely decorative or even comparatively useless trees like the sausage (*Kigelia pinnata*). In the decorative category can be found three examples, the *ashupal* (wrongly described as Ashok), the *saptparni* ('seven-leaved') and *karanj*. Just about every park, public building and home has avenues of the *ashupal* because it grows quickly and like the Royal Palm lends a fake regal dignity to buildings. Its Latin name helps identification: *Polyalthea* ('many-leaved') *longifolia* ('long-leaved'). That is precisely what it is — an abundance of long, tapering leaves. Its yellow-green flowers which appear sometime in March are barely noticeable. The term *althea* also means cure and its leaves are believed to have medicinal properties.



The *saptparni* (*Alstonia scholaris*) is statelier than *ashupal* with broader, more handsome leaves and tiny flowers with a cinnamon-like fragrance. There is a row of them along the wall of Lodi gardens beside Sikandar Lodi's tomb. Then there is the *karanj* or Indian beech, also known as *papari* (in Latin *Pongamia glabra*). Lodi gardens and the Gymkhana Club has many of them. They bear tiny lilac and white blossoms in May and June. One thing vandals use them for is to inscribe their names or love messages on their boles because a scratch soon erupts into a visible wart.

The rainy season is a good time to take a look at a despised but nevertheless most useful tree, the mesquite. Extensive planting of mesquite (*Prosopis juliflora*) all round Delhi, particularly on rocky ridges, has done a great deal to check the advance of the desert and ensure heavier rainfall in the city. Although locals call the mesquite *Kabuli keekar* it does not belong to the *Keekar* family of which we have plenty of varieties, all of them of great utility. The commonest is the *babul* (*Acacia arabica*). It flowers any time between January and the monsoon—tiny yellow pom-poms which can be quite fragrant. It has a very rough, dark-brown bark and long (up to two inches) ivory-coloured murderous looking thorns. The reason it is found extensively all over northern India is that it grows quickly and is put to multifarious uses. Its twigs are the poor man's toothbrush and much pleasanter to chew than *neem*. Its bark and pods, besides providing fodder for goats contain tannin and are used as astringents in the preparation of Ayurvedic and Yunani medicines. It yields 'gum arabic' (hence its Latin name) and its hard timber is used to make agricultural implements. It is also the commonest form of firewood. Another variety of *keekar* is *khair* (*Acacia catechu*) which, as is evident from its name, yields *kattha* (catechu paste), used to smear betel leaves. This is made by boiling chips of its heart-wood. *Kattha* is also used for tanning. A third variety is the *safed* (white) *keekar* (*Acacia leucopholea*) so called because its trunk when young is a pale-yellow or grey colour; it turns dark with

age. Like its cousins, its pods provide cattle-fodder and its wood is used to make agricultural tools. Then we have the wattle (*Acacia mollison*) which has a high tannic content and is now being used to manufacture paper. There is yet a fifth variety of *keekar*, handsomer than its scraggy-looking cousins. *Chattri keekar* or the Umbrella Thorn (*Acacia plainiform*) which has a tall bole with a flat umbrella-like spread of branches and trees. Its wood is even harder than that of other *keekars* and consequently rated higher as tool material.

Clouds and soft moist breezes seem to favour the custom of swinging. Although Delhi has many trees, I now rarely see anyone using their branches to put up swings. It is in the old city and outlying villages that you still see girls in groups singing as they swing flouncing their skirts. For boys it is the season for flying kites. No sooner does the rain stop, than the Delhi skies are full of multi-coloured kites, zig-zagging above the roof-tops and tangling with each other. Triumphant cries of 'Bo-katta' go up as one has its twine sliced off by its rival and begins to float down to earth in majestic sweeps.



A phenomenon of the rainy season for which I have not found a satisfactory explanation is the large number of cows (never buffaloes) that make their appearance in the city, rest on strips dividing dual highways and often sit right in the middle of the road. One of these days I will drive one of them into my garage as unclaimed lost property. Perhaps I will then discover who owns them and why they are let loose during the monsoon season.



August

RAINS HAVE become a routine affair with a shower or two coming down every other day. Rivers continue to rise. Sometimes in this month the Yamuna crosses the danger mark and stays close to it till the end of October. She is now in her true demonic incarnation as Triyama, sister of Yama, ruler of the dead, adding to her brother's subjects by wiping out hamlets along the river's banks. Torrential rains and floods gave birth to the legend that during the four months (*chaturmasa*) that the monsoon lasts we are in *pralaya* — a state of catastrophe—and should not celebrate marriages or other festive occasions. The full moon night of July is *Guru Purnima* when Lord Vishnu, protector and preserver of the world, descends to the depths of the ocean and sinks into deep slumber. Demons take over; the world is at the mercy of black clouds, thunder, lightning and torrential rain carrying death and destruction. Snakes, scorpions and other vermin multiply. Dampness brings on fevers and diseases. August is the month for malaria and dengue fever, and for stomach disorders caused by fouling of drinking water by overflowing drains. The *chaturmasa* ends with the full moon following Diwali when Vishnu re-emerges from his ocean bed to resume his reign over a realm of cloudless climes and starry skies.

Clouds bring life-giving rain as well as death and destruction by flood. They are therefore both welcomed and dreaded: greeted with joy when they first come, feared when they overstay their welcome. Our attitude towards clouds is fundamentally different from those of Westerners. We regard them as emblems of hope; they see them as those of despair and look for silver linings to cheer them up. To us a beautiful woman is one whose hair is as black as monsoon clouds and whose eyes flash like lightning; to the Westerner a girl is pretty if she has a sunny smile and disposition. He wants to escape clouds and rain and seeks sunnier climes; for us one of the joys of life is to be drenched in a monsoon downpour.

You must have often wondered how clouds are formed, why they assume such fantastic shapes and whether we can read any messages in the patterns they make and the pace at which they move. There is always a certain amount of moisture present in the lower atmosphere depending on the temperature of the air. When warm air is cooled this moisture begins to condense till it reaches what is known in the weatherman's language as the 'dewpoint'. A cloud is formed when the air is cooled below its 'dewpoint'.

What makes clouds assume different shapes and sizes? At the onset of monsoons they can be leaden black; after the rains have set in the skies are covered with grey clouds without any shape or form; when the monsoons are about to end, they tumble across like huge, white, mobile mountains. Sometimes they look like ripples of waves; at others like a scattering of partridge feathers.

Every cloud is a veritable *meghadoot*—a cloud-messenger. Clouds are of three main types—cirrus, cumulus and stratus, depending on the altitude at which they are formed. The highest in the sky are the



cirrus. Cumulus are the ones we are most familiar with—they look like puffs of smoke shot into the blue or like white sails billowing out on an azure sea. Cumulus are at a lower level than the cirrus but can go up to a mile and a half above the earth. They often roll into each other and reaccumulate : hence their Latin name, cumulus. The lowest in the atmosphere, sometimes only a few hundred feet above the ground, are the stratus. There are numerous subdivisions to these three types of clouds, but I will not bore you with too much detail. If you want to become a cloud-watcher, what you should look for in clouds apart from their shapes is the height at which they are, the speed at which they travel and the direction in which they are moving. You will soon be able to tell whether rain is likely to follow or whether they are sounding empty thunder.

In the Bible it is written: ‘He that observeth the wind shall not sow and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap’ (Ecclesiastes). I am not sure what the writer of these words meant but we have a large number of proverbs in all our languages based on wind directions and cloud formations as predictors of the weather. The most celebrated of these proverbs are ascribed to the poet-astrologer Pandit Ghagh (seventeenth century) and his low-caste but clever consort, Bhaddari. Says Bhaddari: ‘When clouds appear like partridge feathers and are spread across the sky, they will not go without shedding rain.’ However, there is a Punjabi proverb which says exactly the opposite:

Tittar khambi baddlee,

Rann malai khaee;

Na oh vassey, na eh vaksey

Bachan na khaalee jaaey

(A cloud like partridge feathers is like a woman who loves clotted cream; the one yields no rain, the other will never make a happy home.)

Pandit Ghagh predicts, ‘When lightning flashes in the northern sky, and wind blows from the east (*purvaiyya*), bring your oxen under shelter because it is sure to rain.’ And again, ‘If a southern wind blows in *Maagh* and *Pans* (January and February), summer rains are bound to be good.’ Some Ghagh-Bhaddari proverbs are designed to keep hope alive ‘If clouds appear on Friday and stay till Saturday, be sure that it will rain.’

All said and done, cloud behaviour is never a fool-proof method of prediction. This is aptly summed up in a Punjabi proverb:

Bijlee chamkey Hardwar

Cbikkad karey naani day baar

(Lightning flashes over Hardwar but its grandmother’s fields that turn muddy.)

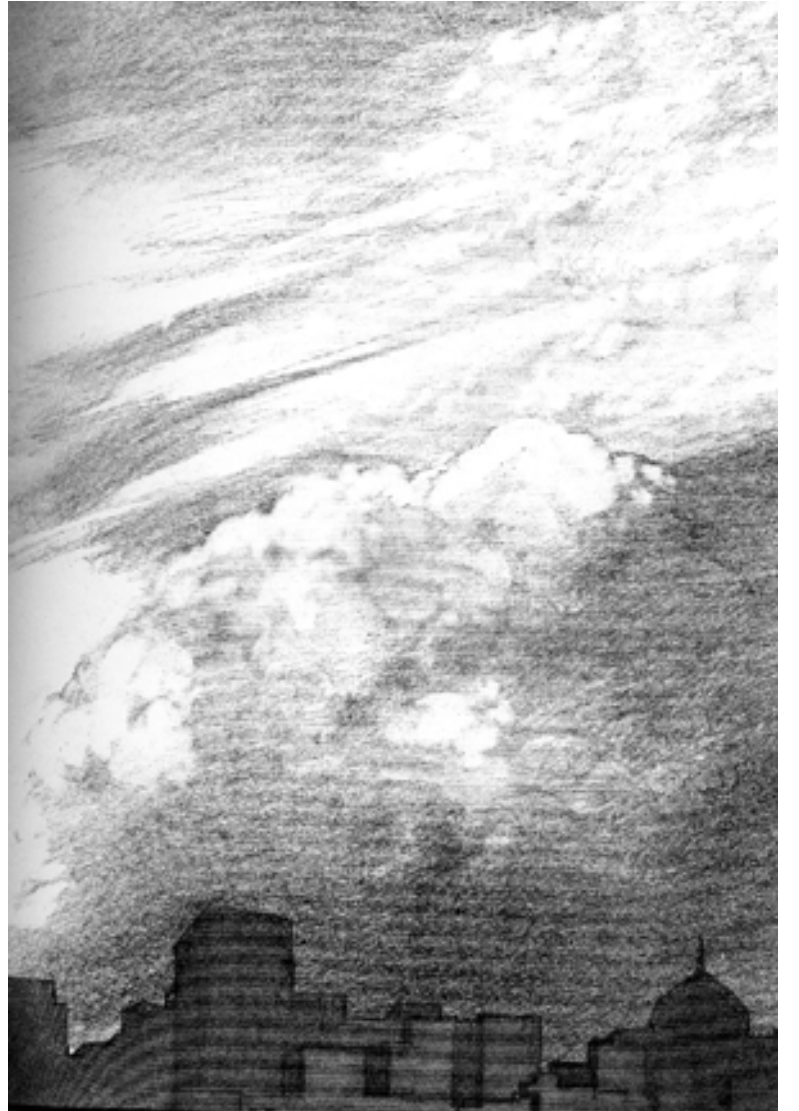
Our ancients did not make a scientific study of clouds but in Sanskrit poets like Bharatrhari and Kalidasa we have two great lovers of clouds. Kalidasa's celebrated *Meghadoot* is addressed to a cloud. In the second part of the epic, the poet takes his cloud on a sort of 'Bharat darshan' of northern India. Madhukar Bakre, whose translation I am using, calls the cloud 'the aerial envoy'. Since the cloud in question is seen on the first day of the month of *Asadh*, i.e., the second half of June, 'snuggling close to the crest of a mountain, perched comfortably atop the peak and behaving like a wild playful elephant engrossed in battering the hill's cliffs with its trunk and tusks,' my guess is that Kalidasa was writing of cumulonimbus clouds which come with the monsoons. 'O cloud, who knoweth not of your noble birth, your ancient lineage in the glorious house of the mighty Pushkara and Avarbaka! You are the powerful courier of Lord Indra, capable of changing your form and shape at will.'

There are many beautiful renderings of poems by our classical Sanskrit poets on clouds and rains in John Brough's *Poems from the Sanskrit*. In this one by Sudraka, a young girl taunts a cloud:

*Thunder cloud, I think you are wicked.
You know I'm going to meet my own lover,
Yet you first scare me with your thunder,
And now you're trying to caress me
With your rain-hands!*

The very first monsoon shower brings frogs into the open. You can see them round the year in muddy ponds and stagnant pools in all our parks. But they await the rains to really find their voices. Of all animal, bird, serpent or amphibian noises, that of frogs is the most difficult to reproduce in words. To describe it as croaking is admitting failure. The Greek poet Aristophanes got pretty close to it in his play *The Frogs* where the noise is described as *Brek-ek-ek-ek, koax, koax! Brek-ek-ek-ek, koax!* For the solitary croaker, there is the simple Americanism: *Newark! Newark.*

Humidity in August can be high enough to turn Delhi into a Turkish bath. It is most enervating; instead of playing my scheduled two to three sets of tennis in the morning, I am drenched in sweat while knocking up and have to call it off in the middle of the second set. My glasses cloud up and become a serious handicap when I play against equals. However, yellow elder trees (*Tecoma stans*) which form a part of the screen at one end of the tennis court are in flower, spreading their bittersweet odour. By coincidence the elders are the same tint of yellow as the tennis balls and



the golden orioles which call ceaselessly all through the morning. Occasionally when pairs of monsoon birds fly overhead, I stop the game to introduce them to anyone interested in meeting them. After years of introductions they still do not know the difference between monsoon birds and lapwings.

Green bee-eaters have disappeared from the *neem* shadowing the bathing pool. Instead there are dragonflies hovering over the water. Where water stands stagnant, as in the moat along Sikandar Lodi's tomb in Lodi gardens or the rectangular pools on both sides of Rajpath, there are so many as to give the appearance of a canopy of dragonfly wings. I have often seen pairs of dragonflies attached to each other and believe they are mating. Apparently the male usually holds the female while she is depositing her eggs in the water or floating debris.

In my younger days, at this time of the year, there used to be lots of fireflies in our gardens and all the parks. They have become a rarity today. Only in Roshanara gardens is one likely to see a few twinkling amongst the bushes. Fireflies (*Photinus pyralis*) are drab-looking insects, despite the spectacular display they make at night. Little is known about them besides the fact that they have glands that secrete substances known as luciferin and luciferase which produce light when they come into contact with oxygen. Unlike

other light, that produced by fireflies and glow-worms has no heat. I once trod upon a glow-worm in the bathroom of my villa in Kasauli. For several hours the floor was lit up with a pale-green glow. Squashed fireflies will likewise keep glowing for several hours. Both male and female fireflies have this inbuilt lighting system. It is believed that the interval of 2.1 seconds between the male flash and the female response is an important factor in their courtship.

Other insects which have become rare are spotted cochinelles, grasshoppers, velvety ladybirds and varieties of beetles. Intensive spraying of pesticides and fumigation seems to have little effect on mosquitoes, dengue flies, midges or cockroaches but has destroyed these beautiful insects.

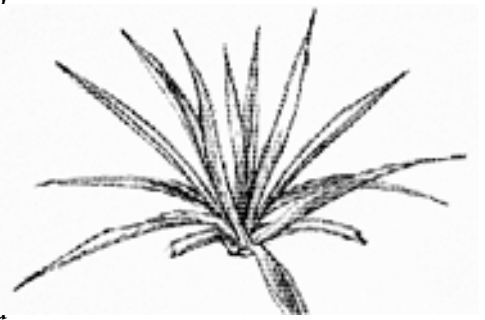
Periodical showers bring on a second but somewhat half-hearted revival of laburnums, *gulumohars*, *jaruls* and rusty shield-bearers. *Jamuns* continue to be shaken down by pickers who now display their hoard in baskets full to the brim. Rain-trees come into their own with fresh green apparel. I wish there were more rain-trees in Delhi. They give a lovely shade; their delicate leaves are said to close up at the approach of rain—hence the name rain-tree (*Sam-ania saman*). Cattle love the pulp made of its pods, and it is fed to cows and buffaloes to increase their yield of milk.

Outside my window the *madhumalati* is in flower again. So is *chandani* ('moonbeam'). As the month proceeds they grow in greater profusion, at times appearing like a star-studded milky way against a wall of green. My *chandani* and hibiscus shrubs continue to be plundered by the devout who



suffer no pangs of conscience from plucking flowers others have planted as long as the loot is offered to their gods.

A flower you must look out for at this time of the year is the *Yucca gloriosa* belonging to the cactus family. In between its sharp two foot long cactine leaves pointing out in all directions is a long green stem. This is a metre high with beautiful ivory coloured flowers like inverted tulips hanging from its sides. The flowers have no fragrance and their petals have a smooth, oily feel to them. The yucca, known as *Raan baan* (Rama's bow) grows wild in the Shivalik hills. Americans call it the soap weed—very unfair! The yucca, as its Latin surname proclaims is a truly glorious sight. There are a few yuccas in Lodi gardens and occasionally some in the roundabout between the Christian cemetery on Prithviraj Road and the Taj Hotel.



September

ON THE first of September the sun rises exactly at 6 a.m.—easy to remember. It sets at 6.45 p.m., making a day of twelve hours and forty-five minutes. By the end of the month it is almost a quarter of an hour later in getting out of bed and retires a quarter of an hour earlier. It remains quite warm, depending on whether or not there is rain. When the sun shines, the temperature can be in the upper thirties in the afternoons; after a spell of rain it drops to the twenties. Frequent rains, though never as heavy as they are in July or August, cause heavy humidity to persist. Several mornings the lawn outside my apartment is bathed in milky-white dew and my car which is parked outside is dew-washed. The front screen is always dry but I have to wipe the rear glass—I have yet to solve this mystery. It could be that the front is closer to the wall or perhaps it is because the rear glass is at a sharper angle.

Just when the monsoon is abating, the snows on the Himalayas melted by the summer heat run down into streams and rivers already replenished by the monsoon. September and October are months of flood. Right across the Indo-Gangetic plain most rivers, from the Sutlej on the Indo-Pakistan border to the Brahmaputra running through Assam, are in full spate.

Villages on their banks are washed away; riverine cities like Lucknow on the banks of the Gomti have knee-deep water running in their streets. Thus nature takes its seasonal toll: winter's cold freezes its victims, summer's heat kills them with sun stroke, and the monsoon drowns them in its floods.

Some years my nature notes record the choryzzia in full flower by mid-September; in others the entry is in October. In all there is reference to the yellow, candelabra-shaped *Sophora griffithi* bushes which line many a road including the one leading to Palam airport. In my little garden, white bougainvillea is at its best, whereas its pink and mauve brethren are strangely flowerless. The *madhumalati* which covers most of my front wall is also at its best and my hibiscus bush yields its yet unopened blossoms to morning temple-goers.

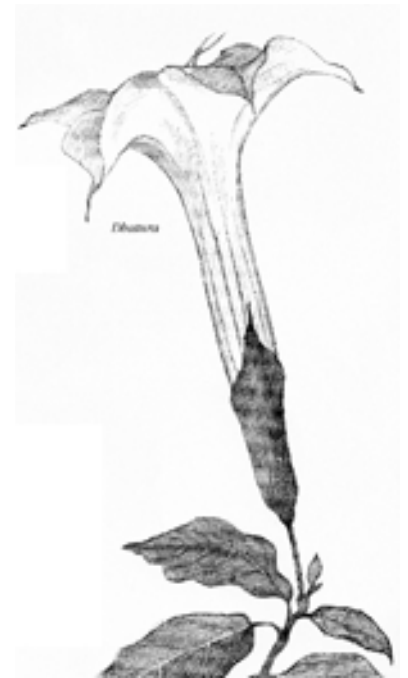
Most trees and bushes come into flower at predictable times of the year. However there are some which seem to be in flower all the time. Of these the commonest are *Ipomeia* and lantana. *Ipomeias* have trumpet-shaped mauve flowers and leaves resembling those of the *peepal*. They grow wild along roadsides and waterways and



are the commonest sight in the country. Rustics with no sense of gratitude call them *bay-sharam* ('shameless') because they flaunt their looks throughout the year. Guru Gobind Singh paid them a more fitting tribute by naming them *sada suhagan*, ever in matrimonial bliss. Besides strengthening mud banks, *Ipomeias* make good compost.

I have never been able to appreciate the beauty of the lantana. It is a weed which grows uninvited over most of the country. Its leaves are rough, its tiny clusters of red and yellow flowers not particularly attractive or fragrant. However, horticulturists have evolved new varieties of hybrids with flowers of one colour—yellow, white, mauve and red— as well as some of different colours on one stem. It has become quite a favourite with gardeners because it does not need much looking after.

Being an indolent people by nature, we tend to go in for plants that need little or no attention. Hence the proliferation of the singularly unattractive *sansivaria*, more appropriately described for its ugliness as 'mother-in-law's tongue'. In recent years our municipality has gone in for planting them around boles of trees they wish to protect from cattle



or human depredation. A more effective and less unattractive protection could be provided by the prickly Mexican poppy (*Argemone mexicana*) which has canary-yellow flowers. It grows wild on the Ridge as does its purple-flowered cousin which produces *datura* poison—a favourite amongst rustics wishing to dispose of inconvenient relatives.

A wild plant which has been unfairly eradicated from its habitat is the *akk* (*Caliotropis*). As children we used to snap off its soft branches to see its milk ooze out. We were told it had antiseptic qualities. Now you have to go to suburbs and the Ridge to find an *akk*.

The one tree which is rarely without any flowers is the rusty shield-bearer (*Peltopborom inerme*). It is a medium-sized tree with small canary-yellow flowers. Its pods when they burst yield small brown husks, which with some effort of the imagination can be thought to look like shields—hence its name. There are lots of shield-bearers in our parks and along highways.

A humbler tree which goes unnoticed is the *bhendi*. It is no relation of the vegetable *bhindi* (okra or ladies' fingers). At one time I was under the impression that Bombay's famous Bhendi Bazaar was so named because of some vegetable market specialising in *bhindis*. As a matter of fact it was an avenue of *bhendi* trees. It is a medium sized tree with beautiful *peepal* like leaves and crinkly bell-shaped flowers which start off being yellow and gradually turn red. Its Latin name *Thespesia* is derived from the Greek word 'thespesios' meaning holy. It was planted near places of worship. Many government bungalows facing Khan Market have *bhendi* trees growing over their walls.

You can't eat the *bhendi* fruit but its flowers (in bloom throughout the year) produce a yellow dye and its timber is as tough as any in the woods. Our poets didn't bother much with such trifles as trees, flowers and birds when they wrote their *Baramasis* or poetic calendars: they were more concerned with damsels and deities and used the changing seasons as occasions to pay homage to them. Even Kalidasa, who was a keener observer of nature than other poets, rarely bothered to go into any detail. His verses to autumn, by which I presume he meant the post-monsoon months, are elusive:

*The autumn comes, a maiden fair,
In slenderness and grace,
With nodding rice-stems in her hair,
And lilies in her face,
In flowers of grasses she is clad;
And as she moves along,
Birds greet her with their cooing glad
Like bracelets' tinkling song.*

(Translated by A. W. Ryder)

He was right about 'rice-stems in her hair' because it is the season to transplant paddy saplings; also about 'lilies in her face' because at this time of the year ponds are flecked with water lilies. When he wrote of 'flowers of grass' he probably meant to indicate that not many flowers are to be seen in this season. There is also less bird song to be heard than at other times. Most birds are busy looking after their young and have little time for 'glad cooing.' Many mornings I have seen *koel* chicks, now full grown, cawing like their crow foster parents and being fed by them while pairs of *koels* fly past as if it were no concern of theirs. I occasionally see grey hornbills flying across the tennis court and the bathing pool where green bee-eaters still come to slake their thirst on warm afternoons, and hear green bar-bets or woodpeckers—but little else. The noteworthy bird life at this time of the year is flocks of crows that I encounter every morning on the road. They seem to gather for some sort of debate because there is nothing edible within sight. I have also noted similar assemblies of mynahs.

There are not many fruits in Delhi. Mangoes have become a memory of the past. The few varieties of citrus fruit we grow are yet to ripen. But from orchards of Kashmir and Himachal come Red and Golden Delicious apples, almonds, pine nuts (*chilgozas*) and walnuts.

September, they say, is the beginning of the season of fulfilment. Kalidasa alluded to this in the following verse:





Over the rice-fields, laden plants
Are shivering to the breeze;
While in his brisk caresses dance
The blossom-burdened trees;
He ruffles every lily-pond
Where blossoms kiss and pan,
And stirs with lover's fancies fond
The young man's eager heart.

(Translated by A. W. Ryder)

There are many festivals during the rainy season. I mentioned in my notes on the preceding month that it begins with *Harishayani* when Vishnu begins his long slumber in the depths of the ocean and demons take over the administration of the universe. Then comes *Guru-purnima*, set apart for paying homage to one's mentors (Teachers' Day), followed by *Nagapanchami* which falls on the fifth day of the bright fortnight of *Savan* (early August). It is dedicated to the worship of snakes, chiefly cobras. You won't see much snake worship in Delhi but it is a popular festival in Maharashtra where

people draw images of cobras on either side of their doors. Snake charmers display their snakes and ask for money to buy milk for them. (The cobra's love of milk is as much a legend as its fascination for *been* or gourd-pipe music: it actually prefers frogs to milk and, having no ears, sways to the *been* simply because it is afraid of being attacked by it.) The most popular monsoon festival in Delhi is *Rakshabandhan* which falls some time in mid-August. It is Sisters' Day when girls tie tinsel armlets round the wrists of their brothers and receive presents from them. The custom seems now to have degenerated into a device practised by women to extort favours from their gentlemen friends. *Teej* (early September) is another monsoon festival celebrated with song and swinging.

Durgapuja (early October) is a nine-day affair largely confined to the Bengali community. But Dussehra, which comes about the same time, is celebrated on an elaborate scale with open-air performances of the Ramayana ending with the burning of mammoth effigies of Ravana and his kinsmen. Dussehra is also Warriors' Day, when arms and weapons are worshipped.

The last monsoon festival which falls in late October, quite a few weeks after the rains have ceased is Deepavali or Diwali, the festival of lamps. This symbolizes the triumph of good over evil—of gods over demons. Then it is time for Lord Vishnu to rise from his four-month long slumber, and in his role of the Preserver of the Trinity of Gods, make sure that all's well with the world.

As amongst humans, so amongst trees, the aristocracy have many names. I don't know another tree which has as many names as the temple tree. It is also known as the pagoda tree and frangipani. It has two equally common Hindustani names, *Champa* and *Gul-e-Cheen*. In Maharashtra it is known as the *Khair Champa*; in Tamil, *Perangalli*. However it is always best to know natural phenomenon by their scientific Latin names. It is *Plumeria acutifolia*—named after a 17th century French botanist Charles Plumier; *Acutifolia* refers to its tapering leaves. I have a couple of them growing besides the two gates of my apartment block, and it is quite a job keeping them alive—as the urchins of the locality love climbing its fragile branches—which snap under the slightest pressure. God-fearing (but clearly not nature-loving), vandals also plunder it for its delicately





scented ivory-white and pink blossoms, to offer to their deities. The unique thing about this multi-named but modest-sized tree is that even when uprooted-it continues to come into leaf and flower. It is rightly regarded as the emblem of immortality. It is not an import from China as its name *Gul-e-Cheen* might indicate but from Latin America.

Champa is a useful little tree. The milky sap which oozes out of its broken limbs is used to cure rheumatism and mixed with sandal oil and camphor as a remedy against itch.

It is difficult to find out how birds and animals choose their mates or whether life-long fidelity is a norm. There are legends of Sarus cranes and swans pairing for life and it is widely believed that if one dies the other languishes away. I have never been able to check on these stories. Courtship and mating is another matter. In Lodi gardens I have watched house crows assembled on a lawn apparently arranging matrimonial contracts. One crow, presumably a male, would carry a

twig in its beak and place it at the feet of another, presumably a female. The gesture was clear: 'Be my mate and with twigs like this one we will make our nest.' Another male bird would seize one end of the twig and a tug of war would commence between the two males with the female pretending to be indifferent as to the outcome. Other birds are not so blatant in their approach as house crows. They begin to woo their loved ones with offerings of berries. I have seen barbets carrying beak-fulls of *putranjiva* berries to offer to their lady friends. If the offering was rejected by one lady, it was made to a more amenable one. There is quite a time lapse between selecting a suitable partner, courting and consummating the relationship. Some species of birds begin looking for nesting sites long before they engage in sex; others like house sparrows first get down to having fun and think of their responsibilities as parents later.

Courting is largely a male privilege; most females play hard to get till they are properly aroused. Most of us are familiar with the peacock's spectacular and aggressive display of his resplendent beauty as he struts about his loved one— sometimes a harem of loved ones. Other birds can be equally charming to watch: rock-pigeons puffing out their chests as they go in semi-circles bowing and cooing, or robins pushing back their necks in arrogant pride till they touch their erect tails and burst into love song. The most unforgettable sight is the courtship between blue jays (*Neelkanth*). They rise straight into the sky and come down in loops displaying their light and dark blue plumage till they are a few inches above the ground—then rise again and again to repeat their looping-the-loop courtship dance. Only the accompanying guttural calls are far from musical. It is this manner of courtship which has given them the alternate name of blue rollers.

An interesting method of mate selection is that of the striated weaver bird (*baya*). Bachelor birds start building nests of woven grass, usually choosing *keekar* or palm trees. When the facade of the pendulous nests is completed with egg chambers ready for occupation, they invite hens to inspect their handiwork. Hens inspect several male-made nests before they decide which one they like. With the choice of the nest goes the choice of the mate, followed by mating. It is then the female bird, who furnishes the egg chamber with pellets of mud over the straw. Thereafter she is the sole mistress of the nest, saddled with the responsibility of incubating her eggs and feeding her chicks. Meanwhile the male bird busies himself



fabricating other nests and inviting other female birds for inspection followed by a short-time marriage of convenience. Since male weaver birds outnumber females, many nests remain untenanted.

The one species of bird which I suspect has no patience with courting, gets down to the business of sex, is thoroughly promiscuous and totally avoids parental responsibility is the *koel*. I have often seen males pursuing females at great speed, screaming as they dart in and out of trees like rapists in pursuit of their quarry. The female *koel* which seems to protest too much does so in the same manner to every male, and then quietly submits to being mounted. Thereafter all the pair does is to locate crows' nests for the female *koel* to off-load her eggs. So is the wildest of our common birds, the house crow, made into the laughing stock of the bird world. I have more sympathy for babblers because they make little pretence of being cunning. As a matter of fact they are as stupid and careless as they are noisy. They often leave their nests unattended, which are then occupied by other birds. Their eggs are often eaten up by crows. Since they can't count and are too pre-occupied with babbling, they don't notice that the pied-crested cuckoos have outwitted them and are enjoying a carefree monsoon season.

By September the first migrants who spend their winter season in Delhi begin to arrive. In my little garden I watch out for wagtails and the redstart. The trees in the nursery behind my garden have flocks of starlings chattering on their branches. Before the nursery man cleared the ground for potted plants, there used to be a thick undergrowth of wild plants. I recall two successive Septembers when a pair of mongooses had their litters in this shelter. About the same time the palm squirrels nesting in the *karanj* had their offspring. The nursery man got rid of the mongooses; my army of cats ate up the palm squirrels.



October

OCTOBER IS the pleasantest of all the months of the year in countries in the northern hemisphere, including India. The summer monsoon has washed the dust and dirt off the vegetation; the earth is still damp; not every gust of wind that blows sends up clouds of dust as it does at other times of the year. The air is clean, clear and wholesome. You do not have to go very far from Delhi to be able to see lofty snow-covered mountains over a hundred miles away.

Rivers continue to be in spate, flooding villages lying along their banks. Some years there is more water in the Yamuna in October than in any other month of the year.

In Delhi the temperature drops from the searing 40° of May and June to under 30°. There is a nip in the morning air, and evenings are cool. Bathing in the swimming pool becomes chillier but more bracing. I manage to indulge in it till the last day of the month and usually have the pool to myself. I am saved from punishing myself much further as thereafter most club pools are closed for the winter months.

Apart from choryzzias and Indian myrtles there are hardly any other flowering trees or bushes to be seen. Lots of choryzzias have been planted in Delhi in recent years. Like eucalypti, *gulmohars*, laburnums and *ashupals* (*Polyathea longi-folias*), Delhiwalas have discovered that the choryzzia is also a quick-growing tree and has the additional advantage of bearing blossoms that remain on the bough for over a month. Since new housing colonies keep coming up all the time and our architects instead of planting trees first think of them last, choryzzias make up for lost time.

The myrtle, or to give it its full name, crepe myrtle (*Lagerstroemia indica*) is in fact a native of China as its Hindi name *Chinai mehndi* indicates. While in India its bark is regarded as a stimulant, in China its bark, leaves and flowers are used as purgatives. Indian myrtles are less conscious of their status than the

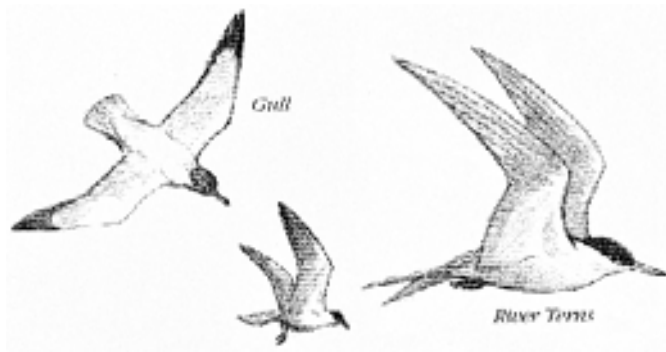


queen's flower (*Lagerstroemia flos regina*) but are as hardy and long lived as their more glamorous relatives. You can see them in pink, crimson, mauve and white in many gardens, roundabouts and parks.

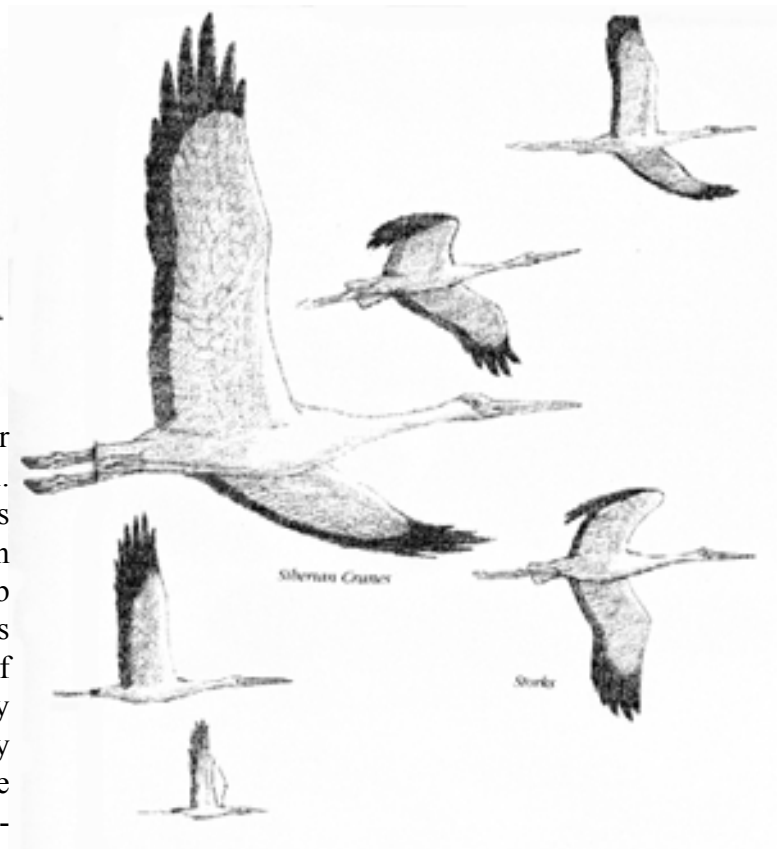
During October nature generally assumes a low profile. Few flowers are seen and few birds can be heard. It is a time of fulfilment of past endeavour. Early October birds which spend their summer months in central Asia can be seen returning to the more hospitable winter climate in India. Flocks of teal, mallard, pintail, shovellers, brahmyny ducks and a variety of geese, storks and cranes descend on the swamps and jheels (lakes) around Delhi. They very sensibly avoid stretches of water which have trees or bushes behind which shikaris can hide, and prefer open stretches from where they can survey the surrounding countryside. They avoid those parts of the Yamuna which are close to human habitation. A good place to watch them is near Tilpat where the river makes a wide curve. Its western bank is high, below which runs the main stream. It is frequented by bank mynahs and turtles which plop into the water as soon as they detect a human presence near them. The eastern bank is a flat stretch of sand with shallow water and is a good distance from vegetation. It is along this bank that you can see a baffling variety of water fowl floating on the stream or sunning themselves on the sand. Gulls and river terns slice the air; sand-pipers, stilts, avocets and jacanas can be seen scampering along sand banks; fishing eagles scan the surface of the river looking for fish. When disturbed the birds rise skywards in their thousands in a great whoosh of wings, squawking and calling to each other.

Besides the trans-continental migrations, there are also local migrations of birds resident in the country. Amongst the commonest sights this time of year are flocks of green bee-eaters. Sometimes they can be seen in hundreds, chirping away as they fly. I have seldom seen a bee-eater on the ground; they have fragile legs and are loath to walk or hop about. All their hunting for insects is done in the air. Like bank mynahs they make their nests in the sides of banks, the nests being no more than long holes in which they lay their eggs.

My September diary records many mornings when I saw crow parents feeding &oe/ chicks. By October the chicks are full grown and can be seen flying from tree to tree followed by their still loving foster parents. But it would seem that the truth begins to dawn on both the crows and the *koel* chick. The chick's call begins to change to a sound closer to that of its real parents, and it seems less eager to remain in the company of the crows.



I spend Dussehra or Diwali in my summer cottage in Kasauli, 6000 feet above sea level. Along the northern and eastern horizons as far as the eye can see are snow-covered mountains; on the other two sides stretch the plains of Punjab and Haryana with the river Sutlej snaking its silvery way across the expanse. Kasauli is full of pine trees and wild flowers. As in Delhi, so in my mountain villa, I have a bird bath. Here I rarely see any of the common birds of Delhi. There are lots of bulbuls, but they are largely of the white-cheeked variety which is rare in Delhi and not the red-vented kind which are plentiful in the capital. There are very few house crows but many jungle crows and ravens, few white-backed vultures but quite a lot of lammergeyers, few house sparrows but many cinnamon sparrows. Doves and wood-





peckers are also of a species different from those seen around Delhi. The rhesus monkeys are of a larger size and more aggressive, and there are many more langurs to be seen.

I have occasionally seen Kasauli birds fly overhead in Delhi: flocks of minivets, at times cuckoos and once even the fabulous paradise fly-catcher. Malcolm MacDonald has recorded its presence in his Delhi garden. I get to see a few every year in Kasauli in October and one writer saw it in the grounds of Raj Bhavan in Madras. It is a spectacularly beautiful bird. The male, no larger than a bulbul, has silver-white plumage with a black crest and a tail consisting of two long feathery ribbons over a foot in length.

October is a good month to renew our acquaintance with our monkey cousins. Bonnets and langurs are rarely seen in Delhi but rhesus abound. By this time many young ones can be seen in different areas. There are several troops living in Tughlaqabad Fort which they share with flocks of peafowl. The All India Institute of Medical Sciences has several families which live on food offered to them by grateful indoor patients whose tedium is relieved by their antics outside their windows. I am more familiar with a troop that inhabits a small stretch of road facing the Indian Air Force Headquarters, not far from the South Block of the Secretariat. Passers-by give them fruits and nuts. On government holidays when there is no one to offer them food, they forage for themselves.

I have known the rhesus in different habitats. Some males can be very aggressive and ferocious. However, I have yet to encounter any which bear out Mark Twain's account of them on his visit to Delhi in 1896. He was apparently describing James Skinner's

spacious bungalow in Kashmere Gate, the Patel Hindu College for many years, when he wrote the following description of their antics:

'In the Mutiny days the mansion was the British General's headquarters. It stands in a great garden—Oriental fashion—and about it are many noble trees. The trees harbour monkeys; and they are monkeys of a watchful and enterprising sort, and not much troubled with fear. They invade the house whenever they get a chance, and carry off everything they don't want. One morning the master of the house was in his bath, and the window was open. Near it stood a pot of yellow paint and a brush. Some monkeys appeared in the window; to scare them away, the gentleman threw his sponge at them. They did not scare at all; they jumped into the room and threw yellow paint all over him from the brush, and drove him out; then they painted the walls and the floor and the tank and the windows and the furniture yellow, and were in the dressing room painting that when help arrived and routed them.

'Two of these creatures came into my room in the early morning through a window whose shutters I had left open, and when I woke one of them was before the glass brushing his hair, and the other one had my note-book, and was reading a page of humorous notes and crying. I did not mind the one with the hair-brush, but the conduct of the other one hurt me; it hurts me yet. I threw something at him, and that was wrong, for my host had told me that the monkeys were best left alone. They threw everything at me that they could lift, and then went into the bathroom to get some more things, and I shut the door on them.'



I will not bore you with details of the family set-up of rhesus monkeys. An hour any evening in the fort of Tughlaqabad will reward you with whatever information you need on the dominant male, his harem and unattached bachelors. If you are intrigued by the red faces and rears of some rhesus I can enlighten you. Red faces are an inherited characteristic and both males and females can have them. Red bottoms are entirely feminine and the colouring depends on the menstrual cycle; the brighter the red, the more receptive. A bright red behind in a Lady Rhesus is in fact a green signal for a randy Sir Rhesus.

November

NOVEMBER WAS never a favourite-month of English poets. With them a mood of melancholy set in as if in preparation for a long, bleak winter. To wit, Thomas Hood:

No shade, no shine, no butterflies, no bees

No fruit, no flower, no leaves, no birds

— *November*

Indian poets viewed the month with different eyes, perhaps because there are more fairs and festivals in November than in any other month of the year, notably the most spectacular festival of lamps, *Diwali*.



Amir Minai (1828-1902) saw something admirable in nature throughout the year. In Spring it was the breeze which swayed flower-laden branches as gently as a mother rocks her baby's cradle. Even the largely flowerless autumn months moved Minai to exaltation:

Shaakhon say barg-e-gul

Nahin jhartey hain baagb mein

Zavar utaar rahaa hai

Uroos-e-bahaar ka.

(Think not that branches are casting off their flowers,

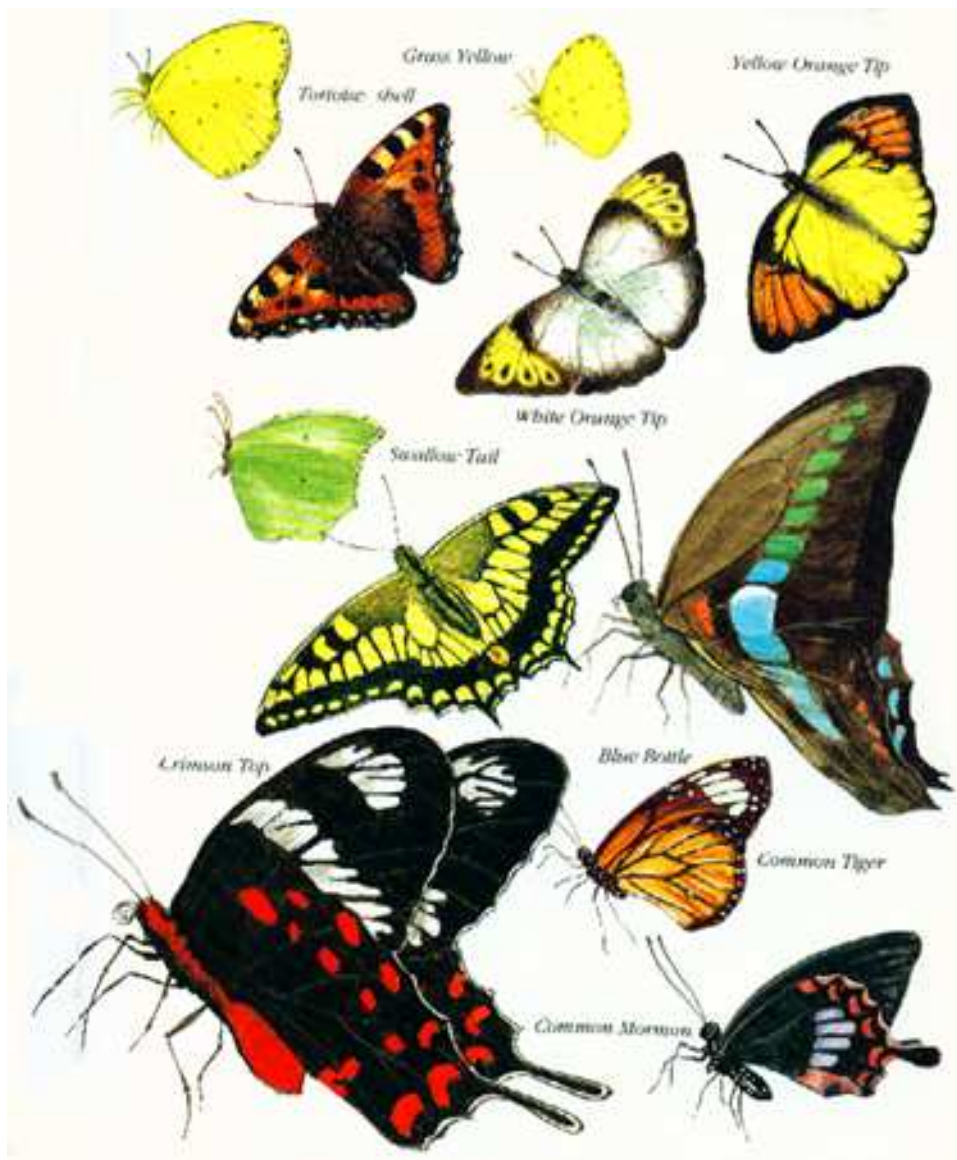
It is the bridegroom of Spring removing his bride's ornaments.)

If Thomas Hood had come to Delhi in November, he would have seen some trees in flower and certainly a large variety of butterflies. In my little patch of garden I have recorded more butterflies in November than in other months. I am not very knowledgeable about butterflies and the best I can do is to keep Naresh Chaturvedi's illustrated *Butterflies of India* handy. When I see one flitting about I run out with a book in hand and see if it matches one in the butterfly calendar. I am pretty certain that a common visitor is the crimson rose (*Polydorus hector*) with its jet-black wings streaked with white and a dash of red. Its favourite haunts are the lime trees and lantana bushes at the edge of my garden. I have also identified common yellows, swallow-tails (*Papilio machaon*), blue-bottles, common tigers, mormons, tortoise-shells, grass yellows, orange tips and brimstones. There must be many other varieties which eluded identification. Their restless nature always reminds me of a child's description of them as 'flutterbys'. However beautiful they look, they must be quite unappetising to birds. Sparrows, mynahs and crows, which go for just about any insect or beetle they can spot, leave butterflies severely alone.

One November morning a red-vented bulbul flew into my study and perched on a blade of the ceiling fan. It flew around the bookshelves as if looking for a title and again sat on the fan blade twittering furiously at me for not having the book it was looking for. It departed as un-ceremoniously as it had entered. I examined the hibiscus hedge to see if it had a nest there but found none. It is odd that I have often spotted nests of the other two varieties of bulbuls seen in Delhi, the white-cheeked and the red-whiskered, both of which are rare, but only once of this commonest black-headed red-bottomed species. However, while looking for its nest I came upon one of a honey-sucker. They are frequent visitors to my garden, as are tailor birds.

Poets have noted the clarity of November skies. For Walter Scott, November's sky is chill and clear, November's leaf is red and sere. John Freeman (1828-1929) was more explicit in his description.

*Than these November skies
Is no sky lovelier
The clouds are deep,
Into their grey and subtle spies
Of colour creep,
Changing their high austerity to delight
Till ev'n the leaden interfold are bright*





The November sky in Delhi has an ethereal quality. It is best seen at the hour of sunset and dusk when it assumes a silvery grey luminescence which creates an illusion of a vast breathtaking expansiveness. The longer you gaze at it, the more you feel yourself becoming a part of it.

Days shorten perceptibly; evening shadows lengthen sooner and the air is distinctly cooler. By mid-November come reports of first snowfalls in the Himalayas and the glass in Delhi falls to under 30° maximum to 14° minimum. By Diwali; the nights are cool enough to wear light, woollens. It is also the beginning of periods of morning mists — light and infrequent to begin with, getting thicker through December and occasionally assuming the blanket thickness of pea-soups.

It is true that there are not many flowers around. However, choryzzias and pink cassias, though fading, are still there and chrysanthemums begin to come into their own. Those with sharp eyes will notice that the seven-leaved (*saptaparni* in Sanskrit,

Alstonia scholaris in Latin) trees grown extensively in the parks of Delhi have barely perceptible light green flowers—nothing much to look at, and with a faint cinnamon odour.

Owlets are one of the three species of birds I have noted in my entries for November. I used to see a few sitting in holes in the walls of Sikandar Lodi's tomb taking in the evening sun with their eyes blissfully closed. As one approached them, they opened their lustrous eyes, glowered menacingly and after a few duckings of their heads, as if preparing to hurl themselves on you, scuttled back into the secure darkness of their holes. Sudra-ka has a lovely description of owlets' behaviour at dusk:

*Slowly the darkness drains away the sunlight.
Drawn homewards to their nests, the crows fall silent,
And now the owl sits on the hollow tree,
Bolder; neck sunk inside his body,
And stares; swivels his head; and stares.*

(John Brough: Poems from the Sanskrit)

One monsoon the wall in which I used to see spotted owlets came crashing down. I am not sure whether they perished in its collapse, but I have not seen them around in the same area in Lodi Garden. On the other hand, I hear them every November morning between 4 and 6 a.m. I have noticed two varieties of calls. At dusk it sounds like *kuk, kuk, kuk* followed by a prolonged *kurrh*. In the predawn hours it is wild *chickich, chickich* : *chatter, chatter, chatter*. I have never heard Delhi owls hoot the way their kinsmen do in the hills of Kashmir—nor complain to the moon as Gray heard them do from the 'ivy-mantled tower' near Stoke Pages churchyard. The other two species whose calls I have



recorded in this month are Bengal tree pies and woodpeckers. But then I see and hear birds all round the year making the same kind of calls and there is not much autumnal variation in bird song.



December

FOR GOOD reasons winter nights are quieter than during summer months. Some nights the only sounds breaking the night's silence are dogs barking—not growling or snapping, just barking for hours on end without apparent purpose. The barking occasionally turns to baying or howling. This is not directed to fellow canines as very rarely do dogs living in our block of apartments respond to it. There was a time when dogs were compelled to take up challenges howled at them by packs of jackals which foraged for leftovers in garbage dumps, and there was much exchange of abuse between cousins. Now jackals have all but disappeared from Delhi and dogs bark just as men whistle — to ward off fear of the unknown that lurks in darkness.

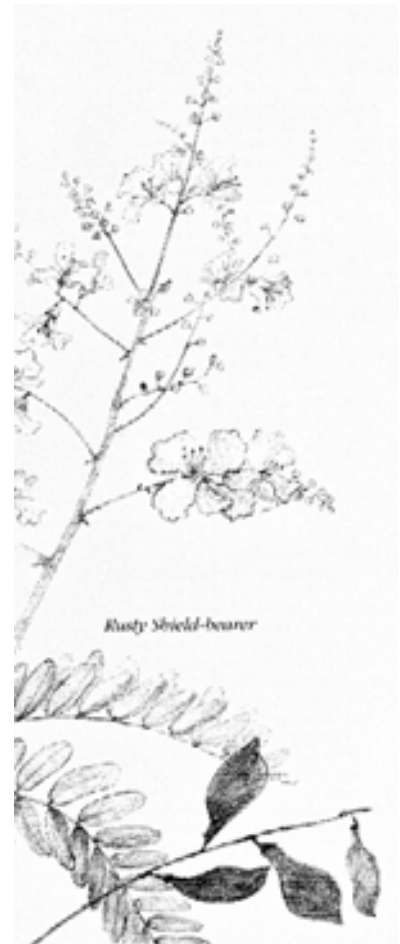
In the wintry silence my ears pick up distant sounds. I am certain roosters do not have a premonition of dawn as is ascribed to them. Some mornings I am woken by its call at 4 a.m. Other days the same rooster's awakening call is at 5 a.m. when there are still two hours to go before the sun rises. So much for Milton's observation: 'While the cock with lovely din/Scatters the rear of darkness thin!' Also Christopher Fry's 'Pick-axe voice of a cock begging to break up the night.' I have heard *koels* and *papeehas* call at midnight and lapwings scream at all hours of the day and night.

Some nights when I can't sleep and go to my study, usually the only sounds I hear are the chitter-chatter of owlets in the mulberry tree. It is some hours after the owlets have departed and the cawing of crows reassures them that it is safe to come out — that sparrows dare to chirp. By then the eastern horizon has turned from black to grey and the morning star twinkles brightly in the sky.

Early December is cool but seldom cold. To experience real cold we have to wait for the winter monsoons or snowfall in the Himalayas. Then the glass dips suddenly and chill winds blow. Some years the minimum temperature ranges between 8° to 5° after midnight and the morning, and the maximum rarely goes above 20° in the afternoon. Rain combined with variations in temperature produce high humidity and heavy dew. It almost ruins my morning game of tennis. Tennis balls soaked with dew pick up the red of the gravel and turn the same colour. As a result one can't see them till they are almost upon you. Another by-product of humidity and low temperatures is morning mists. I do not recall seeing many in my childhood. Delhi has since then added to its population ten times over and has probably a hundred times as many cars today than it had 50 years ago. Now on many winter mornings Delhi is blanketed under a layer of thick mists or smog.

For once Kalidasa was somewhat off the mark in his lyrical description of nature when he wrote of ripened com during the winter months:

*The bloom of tenderer flowers is past
 And lilies droop forlorn
 For winter-time is come at last,
 Rich with its ripened corn;
 yet for the wealth of blossoms lost
 Some hardier flowers appear
 That bid defiance to the frost
 Of sterner days, my dear.
 The vines, remembering summer, shiver
 In Frosty winds, and gain
 A fuller life from mere endeavour
 To live through all that pain;
 Yet in the struggle and acquiescence
 They turn as pale and wan
 As lonely women who have missed
 Known love, now lost and gone.
 Men may these winter days show forth
 To you each known delight,
 Bring all that women count as worth
 Pure happiness and bright;
 While villages, with bustling cry,
 Bring home the ripened corn,
 And herons wheel through wintry sky,
 Forget sad thoughts forlorn.'*
 (Translated by A. W. Ryder)



Few flowering trees are to be seen this month. Remnants of hardy choryzzias and rusty shield-bearers brave the cold. Choryzzias, both the pink-and-white and the ivory white variety, which were in full flower through October and November, begin to wilt by early December and are largely flowerless by Christmas though some manage to hang on to their blossoms till early March.

The *siris* behind the Gymkhana Club tennis courts which attracts an unusually large variety of birds throughout spring and summer is left to pied mynahs which are in permanent residence. Their nest has been empty for some months but these birds will not leave their tree untenanted. One morning what seemed to be a *menage a trois* went awry and three of them came tumbling down on the ground locked by their claws in a noisy quarrel.

By the time sunlight floods the courts the *siris* receives other visitors. Golden-backed woodpeckers come screaming in their undulatory flight to join smaller speckled green species of their tribe in examining its bole and branches for insects. Likewise green barbets, somewhat slower in the air than woodpeckers but likewise wavy in flight, find themselves too exposed on the sparse, leafed *siris* and rarely risk more than a few half-hearted gurgles before they fly away to trees providing better cover. Perhaps for the same

reason *koels* and tree pies which feel more protected in thicker foliage can only be heard in the distance.

Mid-December the sun enters Scorpio. I do not know what this means exactly but for some years my diary records disturbances in the elements. It seems that more earthquakes and volcanic eruptions occur in autumn or winter than in other seasons. The Quetta earthquake of 1934 which took over 30,000 lives was a winter phenomenon. In 1982 an earthquake in Yemen took over 2000 lives. On November 13, 1985 a volcanic eruption in Colombia engulfed an entire village killing over 20,000 people.

December 22 is the winter solstice, the shortest day and the longest night of the year. However my records taken from the timings issued by the Meteorological Department for 1985 and 1986 do not bear this out. On the 22nd the sun sets at 5.29 p.m. and rises next morning at 7.11 a.m. making it a night of 13 hours 42 minutes. It is of exactly the same duration as the next night (the 23rd). On Christmas Eve and Christmas, the sun rose a minute later than the solstice but also set a minute later. It continued to rise and set at the same time till the 27th. It appeared that a minute added in the evening is evened out by a minute's tardiness in rising. On the last day of the year the sun set at 5.39 p.m.—the same as it did on the solstice.

Though not many flowers are to be seen in public parks or roundabouts, December is the time for potted chrysanthemums and the budding of roses. I am not enamoured of the chrysanthemum; it is an untidy cluster of petals both in its small as well as large prize winning varieties. However, it was the top favourite of the Punjabi poet Bhai Vir Singh. He eulogised its beauty in verse and cultivated many exotic varieties in his large garden in Amritsar. Similarly, though not many marigolds (*gairindas*) are grown in private gardens they can be seen in mountain heaps outside temples and markets. It is the poor Delhiwala's offering to his gods, and is strung in garlands to welcome visitors. On Christmas Day small bands of players consisting of a couple of trumpeters and drummers wearing marigold garlands round their necks go around Christian homes collecting donations. Flower-sellers set up stalls outside churches. All they have to offer are marigolds. Christmas in Delhi is usually as bright with sunshine as this golden flower.

There was a time when I spent the last evening of the year at the Gymkhana or the Golf Club drinking, dancing and carousing with friends and their wives. We awaited the witching hour of midnight with bated breaths. As the clock struck twelve we rushed into one another's embrace, burst balloons, sang Auld Lang Syne and wished one another a happy New Year. Parties seldom broke up before the early hours of a chilly New Year's Day.



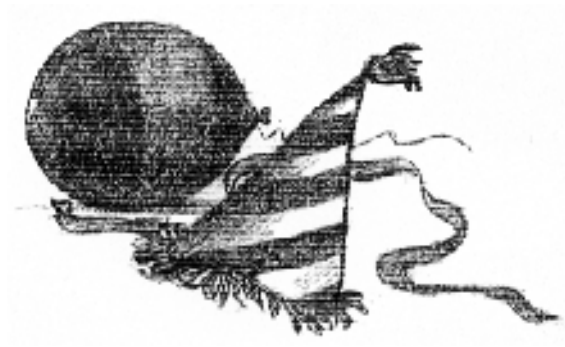
All that is in the past. Now I spend New Year's Eve by my own fireside drinking my own Scotch and musing over days gone by. Thomas Moore's sad and nostalgic poem captures the mood:

*Oft in the stillly night
Ere slumber's chain has bound me
Fond memory brings the light
Of other days around me;
The smiles, the tears,
Of boyhoods years,
The words of love then spoken;
The eyes that shone,
Now dimmed and gone,
The cheerful hearts now broken.*

As I put out the fire, Walter Savage Landor's lines come to my mind:

*I strove with none for none was worth my strife
Nature I loved, and next to Nature, Art,
I warmed my hands before the fire of life;
It sinks, and I am ready to depart.*

I am woken from deep slumber by crackers exploding and people yelling ho, ho, ho\ I know that a New Year has dawned, and I go back to sleep.



End of book